

THE FEMININE RÉGIME



Lavinia gasped. The sting was unbearably ferocious.

THE FEMININE RÉGIME

BY
MISS REGINA SNOW

PICTURES BY PETRONELLA



WILDFIRE

A Wildfire Club Edition

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Introduction

On the Birth of a New Species of Literature

WITH THE publication of *The Feminine Régime* we are witnessing nothing more nor less than the birth of a new species of literature: one which explores, with great subtlety and sensitivity, an area of human, and especially feminine, sensibility, which—although it is known throughout the world and in all periods of history; although it is, for a large number of people, almost as fundamental as the sexual urge itself—has never before been the subject of the psychological depiction and examination possible only through the medium of the novel.

On the face of it, of course, *The Feminine Régime* falls into the category of 'disciplinary novels'; belongs, in other words to a curious subclass of what the booksellers used to term 'curiosa', and what, in more general parlance is called either 'erotica' or 'pornography', depending upon its literary merit and the disposition of the speaker. The majority of such literature was and is simply crude, deserving only the second designation: but even the more elegant and tasteful minority was written purely for the purposes of titillation. The plot was a mere framework upon which to hang undressings, bindings and whippings, or to display the various rituals and paraphernalia of chastisement. The characters, in every instance of which I am aware, are more or less two-dimensional 'pornographers' dummies' upon which to hang, *mutatis mutandis*, the same things. In a majority of instances the 'discipline' (if we may call it such) is harsh to the point of cruelty, and its effect upon the reader all the more bleak because it is unrelieved by the warmth of real human character and sympathy. There is, furthermore, a sense of utter unreality—of a fantasy world created purely for the gratification of certain very limited urges. Just as the characters of the more usual sort of pornographic novel have been described as 'disembodied genitals', so the characters of the flagellation novel are disembodied whips and bottoms. There is a sort of steamy aridity about such books which leaves one half-sickened after reading them, wishing for something wholesome and ordinary to take the taste out of one's mind.

It is, to our way of thinking, very much a *masculine* form of literature, with its possessive concentration upon the isolated object of desire

and its underlying Freudian-reductionist assumption that one can get at the 'real thing' by ignoring the frills and superfluities and just depicting 'hard discipline'—as if the whole magic did not lie in the intangible, and the unquantifiable; as if one could find the 'real onion' by peeling off all the skins—but then this consummationist reductionism is not just a fault of flagellation literature: it lies at the root of the entire capitalist-socialist world-view of late patriarchy: it is responsible for the ugliness and banality of the post-Eclipse* world as well as the ugliness and banality of pornography even before the Eclipse—for pornography is essentially a pre-Eclipse exercise in that stripping of the world down to grasping animality which is the essence of the post-Eclipse world. It becomes less and less necessary as the whole fluorescent circus-world created by the post-Eclipse mass-media increasingly takes on the characteristics of cheap pornographic fantasy, both where its content is specifically erotic and where it is not.

There have been a few—a very few—partial exceptions to this rule. *The Story of O*, for example (significantly written probably by a woman), has been hailed as a work of true literary merit by such luminaries as Mr. Graham Greene, and yet for the present writer its effect is not so greatly different from the other works of the *genre* and certainly we learn little of the central character other than her relation to discipline.

The Feminine Régime is not a book of this sort at all. Its plot is a real plot and its characters real characters with true personalities.

Are we simply saying, then, that *The Feminine Régime* is a good flagellation novel? No, we are saying something rather more than that. Until the twentieth century, explicit discussion of erotic acts and urges was confined to the pornographic fringe. It was considered to be a mere self-indulgence by both its readers and its writers: something to be read in private and destroyed afterwards except in the case of the odd rather rogueish collector. Only in the twentieth century were the *nuances* of human erotic desire explored in depth by novelists of serious intent and adequate powers, and it was not until the time of the *Lady Chatterly* trial that this project received full public acceptance.

The disciplinary novel, however, is still in the pre-twentieth-century stage—or was, until the publication of *The Feminine Régime*. *The Feminine Régime* is a novel 'about discipline' only in the sense that a D.H. Lawrence novel is a novel 'about sex'. It is a novel essentially about the human soul and the deep, mysterious and passionate urges that lie within it toward submission and punishment. These urges have been with us since the earliest times; they are a part, whether recog-

* See the Glossary on Page 10 for a definition of the Eclipse.

nised or not, of the psychological make-up of many of us, they influence unconsciously many of the things we do, and yet never before have they been explored in a serious work of fiction.

It is true, of course that various passages in *The Feminine Régime* do describe scenes and situations not dissimilar to those which are the stock-in-trade of the old 'flagellation novel'. This is because, just as with the offending passages in *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, the feelings which passionate discipline evokes can hardly be conjured up without recourse to some description of what T. S. Eliot would have called their 'objective correlatives'. But it is also a book about many other, related things—it is a book about the nature of the feminine and about the nature of civilisation itself.

There are a number of reasons why the serious disciplinary novel should have been so long in coming. In former times disciplinary and submissive urges were often sublimated in religious feelings and practices, or in the everyday transactions of a more hierarchical society (where, for example, domestic service was still common). The 'liberal' forces responsible for the breaking down of social hierarchy and serious religious devotion, while they were friendly toward sexual expression, were extremely hostile to discipline in all its forms. Thus, while sex was 'liberated', discipline was driven further underground.

That the first serious disciplinary novel should have emerged at the time and from the pen that it did are highly significant facts. Most people are agreed that, not long after the *Lady Chatterly* trial, the Western world underwent a radical change—a change which Miss Snow and her associates call the Eclipse. We said earlier that the reader of the old-style flagellation book was left half-sickened and wishing for something wholesome and ordinary to clean her mental palate. By the fourth decade after the Eclipse, however, it may well be argued that there is nothing wholesome and ordinary left in the world. Certainly a walk through any public street, a perusal of the magazines in the newsagents, the books, or the television programmes of the closing decades of the twentieth century will reveal very little that can be called wholesome; and if, by force of continual and wearisome repetition, this state of affairs has become 'ordinary', it can never be called 'normal' by any one who retains a trace of sanity.

The Feminine Régime is written in the white heat of a profound reaction against the Pit (as the post-Eclipse world is termed therein) and all that it stands for. It puts forward discipline and femininity as the driving-forces of a small world which has returned to sanity. Unlike previous disciplinary novels which have had, essentially, a bad conscience about discipline, this book has a good conscience and more than a good

conscience—its authoress is convinced that she and those like her are the only people left in the world with a *right* to a good conscience.

The Empire in which the action of the book takes place is made up of people who practice discipline in their daily lives, and who, far from seeing themselves (whether apologetically or vauntingly) as 'perverted', know themselves to be the only healthy and right-thinking people in a perverted world.

It was perhaps necessary for this position to have arisen before a serious disciplinary novel could be written. Discipline which takes place outside the context of authentic hierarchical relationships, is mere barren self-indulgence. The term 'discipline' applied to such antics is even more absurd than the usual sloppy usages of the Pit, since whatever sense that word is used in, it must always indicate the very reverse of indulgence. Thus, pornographic 'discipline' is not simply *not* discipline, it is the precise opposite of discipline—and as such it inevitably defeats its own purpose: for the true *frisson* of discipline depends upon its *being* discipline in the true sense, not upon the mere mechanical action of flagellation. The masculine, consummation-oriented literary approach to discipline destroys the thing it seeks. It sets out with a whaling-harpoon to hunt down a delicate and evanescent sensation that cannot even be caught with a butterfly-net. It cannot be caught at all: only appreciated as it fleets through the cloistered sunlight of an authentically disciplined reality.

The discipline described in this book is part of something greater than itself; part of a way of life contrived to free souls from the Pit, and of a profound feminine sensibility. Although it is described in terms which sometimes invoke a warmth of sensuality, that sensuality is never an end in itself; it is only ever a part of a greater whole, and it is for this reason that the book is able to capture the essence of the disciplinary urge. It is a truism to say that one cannot find happiness by seeking happiness. It is only when one is pursuing some other aim, be it victory in a tennis match, the appreciation of a Beethoven quartet or the perfection of one's work, that happiness comes unsought. It is the same with the 'pleasurable' aspect of discipline. It is not when one is seeking a thrill that one finds it, but when one is submitting oneself in all earnestness to one's mistress.

When one seeks the thrill abstracted from its true context, one is subject to a law of diminishing returns. One must seek more and more intense and extreme stimuli in order to produce a steadily dwindling effect. Hence the leather-clad, pierced, tattooed freaks who grub for 'disciplinary' satisfaction in the Pit. The same is true of a literature that seeks the *frisson* of discipline as an isolated phenomenon.

On the other hand, the true magic of discipline may come upon us at any moment in a truly disciplined world. That is why *The Feminine Régime*, being a *real* novel, rather than a 'flagellation novel', is able to convey the true sensibility of discipline. We live and breathe with the characters, we understand them as whole personalities, and then the curious *frisson* of discipline catches us, as it were, from behind, just as it does in real life. It is the only way to capture the evanescent, unmanufacturable tingle of the real thing.

In this book many nuances of discipline are explored, from the passionate dominance of Amanda, through the no-nonsense severity of Miss Wellard to the curious bullying of Vasarde and the classical order of Lady Chelverton's household: each one, in its particular way enriching the disciplinary sensibility of the feminine reader.

It may well be that the foundation of a feminine Empire with a true cultural purpose combined with a high æsthetic of discipline was a precondition for the *experience* of the highest disciplinary sensibility to arise, not merely for its literary realisation. Literature and life in the Empire are, in any case, closely interwoven. The writings of Miss Snow and others have helped to develop the sensibility of which we speak, while the existence of the sensibility was a necessary condition for their writing.

We have compared *The Feminine Régime* to the work of D. H. Lawrence, yet in many ways it is a book written in direct opposition to the Lawrentian revolution, holding that the cult of manly 'frankness' in sexual matters is fundamentally inimical to eroticism of the deeper and more feminine sort, and has been partially responsible for the creation of the ugly, anti-feminine world which followed upon its acceptance by the mass-media. Where Miss Snow is similar to Lawrence is in her belief that eroticism contains a profound and mystical dimension.

For Miss Snow, however, it is the feminine aspect of erotic mysticism that is important, the masculine being all too predominant in the Pit—and no less in its version of 'lesbian' sexuality than elsewhere. The truly feminine is delicate, ætherial, subtle, understated and probably unconsummated: "It is exquisite and it leaves one unsatisfied; what more can one ask for?"

But we have spoken too long of this book in a vein that is very far from its delicacy. Let us hastily step aside and leave the reader to enjoy what one of its early admirers has called "the first book of the twenty-first century", and is certainly the richest, warmest, most intelligent novel—of any kind—that has been penned for a very long time.

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A Short Glossary of Imperial Terminology in Conceptual Order

Imperial terminology has been avoided as far as possible in this book: however a few terms were unavoidable if the Imperial point of view was to be represented at all concisely.

The Eclipse: The utter cultural collapse of the 1960s, with its destruction of all order, sanity and feminine values.

The Pit: The dark, disjointed and de-feminised world created since (and as a result of) the Eclipse. The spatial metaphor is vertical rather than horizontal, thus the Pit is referred to as being 'below' the Empire, rather than 'outside' it. One speaks of "the world below", not "the outside world".

The Empire: The sovereign feminine country created above the Pit for those who would continue, or return to, civilised existence.

Barbarian: A dweller in the Pit. The word should be understood in the Classical sense of "a foreigner outside the pale of civilisation", although the more colloquial modern connotation of "a yahoo" is not entirely absent.

Bongo (slang): adjective: Belonging to or characteristic of the Pit—e.g. bongo-money (decimalised British coinage), bongo-clothes, bongo (i.e. metric)-measurements, bongo-music etc.

Noun: a barbarian, especially one of the more egregious specimens.

Native: A barbarian—more formal and less pejorative than *bongo*.

Up-to-date: (of objects, popular songs, films, motor cars, etc.): made in the period from c. 1920 to c. 1959. Earlier things are 'old-fashioned' later things are 'out-of-date'. Up-to-date things are also called *real*.

Pette: a girl (short for 'chapette').

Miroir: the 'look' or 'surface' which one presents to the world.

The Feminine Régime



*“In an ugly world, the richest man
can buy nothing but ugliness.”*

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

*“People use the word ‘escapism’ as if it were
a criticism ; but if one finds oneself in a prison, the
rational course is to escape.”*

G. K. CHESTERTON

Chapter 1

Escape from the Pit

EVERY ENGLISH CHILD dreams at some time of looking-glasses or of wardrobes :—of magical doorways which will transport her from the drab régime of mundane existence into a world where the colours are not besmirched by the grime of worldly industry ; where possibility is not limited by the vulgar calculations of banker and bureaucrat ; and where the things we see and hear about us are made by some force higher and nobler—or even merely more whimsical—than the soulless mind of the industrial designer and the mindless soul of modern mass-communication.

She dreams for a week or a month ; for a year, or, sometimes, for several years. She dreams until she is claimed by the hand of what is called with unconscious—nay, with insentient—irony, ‘ reality ’ She is claimed by the screaming guitar-player and by the lounging, loose-mouthed youth ; she is claimed by the latest ugly clothes and the latest ugly thoughts ; she is claimed by ‘ emancipation ’ and ‘ responsibility ’, which are the latest names for commercial servitude and the death of the heart.

But what of those who will not be claimed ? Of those who refuse the claim ? What of those who are not at home when the press-gang knocks at their souls ? What of those who are called but have chosen not to answer ? Do they hover in some grey limbo on the margins of the noise and chaos ? Or do they find their way beyond what is called “ reality ” ? Do they find their way to the wardrobe that has no back or the looking-glass that does not resist the pressure of the hand ?

Lavinia, certainly, had found her way. The realities that pressed upon her were different from those which shaped the girls among whom she had grown up (if we may be allowed such a misleading expression—for certainly she had never felt herself among those girls, and equally certainly she had never grown up). Yet the realities which pressed upon her were no less real nor less pressing than those which pressed upon the girls she had left behind her.

At this moment, her present reality was sitting in front of her in the form of a small pile of lined foolscap paper. She was sitting at a desk, at

the end of a row of empty desks. She had chosen the desk nearest the window, but while she was warmed by the early-summer sunshine, she resisted the temptation to look out over the grounds at the sunlit lawns and distant tennis courts. We have spoken of a small pile of lined foolscap paper, but strict accuracy would compel us to say that there were two such piles: one virgin but for the printed lines and the pencilled, half-inch margins which had been methodically ruled in advance; and the other, smaller, pile, covered with a neat, round hand-writing, much slower and more careful than Lavinia's ordinary hand. She had been writing for something under an hour. So far she had written:

"Walking is one of the accomplishments proper to a young lady. Her walk must convey dignity and modesty, and not the lounging casualness of the uneducated."

That was all that she had written, but she had written it forty-seven times and still had two hundred and fifty-three to complete; assuming Jill found them acceptable, which often she did not. It did not seem strange to her that she, a grown girl and legally an adult, should spend the long hours of a beautiful afternoon writing the same phrase again and again and again, merely because another, younger, girl had passed her in the corridor, had noted some small imperfection in her deportment, and had decided, upon the whim of the moment, to set an imposition of six or more times the usual length for such an offence. Lavinia had seen, from the prim little half-smile which Jill had hardly troubled to hide, that she took a marked pleasure in wielding such effortlessly crushing authority.

It was, however, but the pleasure of a moment, and by now she had long forgotten the victim of her whim, sitting at her shadowed desk, writing line after line at her behest. She was now laughing and playing tennis in the brilliant sunshine, as Lavinia had meant to do that afternoon. Indeed, Lavinia's racquet had been in her hand and she had been walking to meet her friends when the sentence had fallen so lightly from Jill's lips, accompanied by a little trilling laugh. Jill would not now think again of Lavinia until that evening, when the girl would come to her door with her little sheaf of papers covered with her careful writing. She would look over them for perhaps half a minute and then, depending partly upon the quality of the work and even more upon her mood of the moment, might or might not decide to spoil Lavinia's next afternoon with a repetition of the task.

"Lounging casualness" was hardly a just description of Lavinia's manner of walking. She had always possessed a certain grace of manner and a certain natural dignity, although the latter in particular had been crushed from her by her years of abrasion in a world which hates noth-

ing more than dignity, unless it be innocence ; which hates all that is upright and crystalline, and all that rises, of its very nature, above the flat and shallow democratic norm.—But it is the wise who are most conscious of their own ignorance, and the good who feel their shortcomings most acutely ; and so it was that Lavinia, for all her grace and uprightness, which had been remarked upon—not always complimentarily—throughout her life, felt how far she was from the ideal to which a young lady should aspire and how much she had allowed herself to be compromised and tarnished by the shabby demands of a worthless world.

Now that she was in another world and subject to other, and better, demands, she fell short of them, and it served her right. If the instrument of her correction was a flighty and rather silly little girl who took a thoughtless pleasure in the tears and labours of those over whom she was given power, still the occasion of her tedious suffering could be attributed to no fault other than her own.

Even if it had been otherwise, there was little value in nurturing rebellious thoughts, for Jill, who walked and spoke consummately well, who played the piano and was a niece—whether real or “adopted ” was not known—of Miss Hazeldean ; Jill, young though she was, was one of the minor powers of this world. Her commands must be obeyed without murmur and her whims and caprices suffered with meekness ; the alternative was a fate far more unpleasant than the hours spent on lines or the humble acceptance of girlishly supercilious admonitions. There was, of course, another alternative :—one might leave this world altogether and return to that other world ;—after all, one was held here by no force beyond one’s own consent.—But that was not to be thought of. That, to Lavinia, was a thought more terrible than the worst chastisement any mistress might devise.

As she wrote the same words again and again, carefully concentrating upon the even shape of her letters and on keeping each word neatly aligned with its counterpart in the sentence above, she found the inner vision of her mind gazing back upon the events that had brought her from that other world to this.

She had been, as we have intimated, one of those who have eluded the press-gang of the soul. It is a condition not without its moments of pride and of elation ; and yet, for the most part, while one remains exiled in a world in which most people have joined, whether more or less voluntarily, the motley crew of vulgar modernity, it is a condition of loneliness and of dull pain, relieved, when relieved at all, mostly by spasms of acute pain. Lavinia, since first reaching adolescence, had sought in life whatever was rich and deep ; whatever was illumined by

passion and delicacy, by gaiety and refinement. In the spiritual emptiness of the Pit she found nothing to satisfy her profound and nameless longings. She had turned to religion, only to find a cheap and shallow social gospel, more flaccid and valueless—if such a thing were possible—than that preached by the politicians. She had turned then to magic and occultism, even to witchcraft. There, at least, despite the dangers to her soul, she felt assured that she would find depth and richness: seers and conjurers of spirits who spoke in tongues and thought in ways little changed since the dawn of ages—or at any rate since the reign of Queen Victoria. In her innocence, she could not envisage how she could be disappointed at least in this expectation; but she was. The modernised occultist spoke the language of Californian pop-psychotherapy or of vulgar, politicised feminism; she thought the thoughts and shared the values of any other television-watching suburban hobbyist.

Music, literature and the arts continued to feed her soul and to nurture deep, romantic longings in her breast; but all these things were from the hands of men long dead: their modern exponents were as much a betrayal and a parody of their true calling as were the modern priest and magician. She lived in a world without eccentrics and without exceptions.

Of course, every third inmate *regarded* herself as an eccentric and an exception. More people imagined themselves to be 'rebelling against convention' than at any other time in history. That *was* the convention. That was how the system worked. Every escape-route had been co-opted. Every exit led back into the Pit. Every 'alternative', however 'way-out', was merely another way in. It was a world where all thought had been tamed and trivialised; all passion de-sublimated and degraded to the level of plebeian banality.—Or so it seemed.

Meantime, her heart was dying within her. The hideous, casual clothes, the awful, garish motor-cars, the moronic hoardings, the hateful shop windows, the brainless noise, the dreadful talk and manners of her contemporaries and their banal, pointless, passionless loose morals—the sins of zombies—all this gathered in her heart as lead gathers in the stomach, killing by inches the joy and the vitality of her life.

While she did not read a newspaper, she continued to take in, from time to time, various publications of different sorts which were not known in the newsagents and which catered to the bizarre extremities of the Pit. She did not actually like them, nor, come to that, did she actually read them, for she had long since decided that, for all their claims to eccentricity, they were too much part and parcel of the world she despised to be of any interest to her. She did, however, carefully examine the small advertisements and announcements, for she felt sure—or al-

most sure—that she could not be the only one in the world who felt as she did ; that somewhere there must be others who had not been drawn into the ugly superficiality of mass-civilisation : somewhere, beneath the surface, must be a world—however small—of depth and richness and inequality ; of aristocratic *hauteur* and intellectual passion ; of dignity and gaiety, of colour and reality, of warmth and wit and truth and life.

And there came a day when her search was rewarded. In one of the more outlandish of the publications she found an advertisement for a kitchen-maid to an all-female household. The post was to be unpaid and the girl must accept the discipline of an Edwardian maidservant. In return she would be totally cared for, freed from all responsibility for herself and inducted into a magical world which had no point of contact with the current world. A telephone number was given, and Lavinia, her hands numb and her brow feverish, picked up her receiver there and then. As the ringing tone commenced, she tried not to be unduly hopeful. She had experienced many disappointments in her short career, and this would more than likely be another. The language of the advertisement seemed to come from a portion of reality such as she had been seeking ; but she knew how easily the barbarians deceive themselves—they probably had a television sitting in the corner !

There was a click and the ringing tone stopped. A prim female voice said : “ This is P—— House. Can I help you ? ” Lavinia’s heart leapt. The tone was right. There was no sense of relaxed, casual modernness ; no dull-voiced sullenness or lazy self-absorption ; no transatlantic false friendliness or over familiarity. The consonants were sharp, the vowels were disciplined, the tone was businesslike and neutral, ready in an instant to become deferent to a superior, briskly firm to an inferior or icy to a time-waster. It was not proof positive :—secretaries and receptionists of such calibre *did* still exist in a few of the best business establishments, but it was certainly an unexpectedly good indication.

“ Can I help you, please ? ” The voice had become several degrees colder as Lavinia failed to reply. She had picked up the ’phone so hastily that she found she really did not know what to say.

“ It is about your advertisement.”

“ Which advertisement, please, madam. We have several.” The voice had warmed considerably, and the ‘ madam ’ was no doubt a recognition of Lavinia’s upper-class vowels. No democratic nonsense here—another good sign.

“ The one for a kitchen-maid.” This, of course, was not really what Lavinia wished to speak about, but she found herself at a loss as to how to begin.

“ One moment, please.” The ‘ madam ’ had disappeared again. Clearly

she did not wish to 'madam' a kitchen-maid, even a well-spoken one. Her tone, however, was still somewhat deferential: after all, she might be speaking to a lady with a surplus bonded maid to dispose of. The post had been advertised in the private publications of the Empire.

The receiver was silent for the better part of a minute, then another voice spoke. It was at once delicately feminine and utterly authoritative, and with a perfection of aristocratic enunciation which put both the receptionist (if such she was) and Lavinia deeply into the shade. It was, perhaps, the first time Lavinia had been made aware of the shortcomings of her voice, of which, hitherto, she had been rather proud and even, in moments of weakness, had been a little abashed in case it should be rather *too* patrician. She blushed inwardly, which added to her confusion.

"I understand that you are replying to my advertisement. Have you a maidservant whom you wish to make over to me?"

"No."

"Do you wish to take a post as a kitchen maid?"

"No."

"I am sorry. Perhaps I should allow you to explain in your own way."

"Well, actually, I am not ringing about the advertisement at all. That is, I *saw* the advertisement and that is why I am ringing, but it is not really anything to do with kitchen maids——" She felt hopeless. What *was* she to say? Rescue came.

"Let me guess. You saw the advertisement and you were fascinated by the glimpse of our way of life. You do not feel that your *métier* is to be a kitchen-maid, but you wish to know more of the world into which such a maid might enter. Is that an approximate summation of the position?"

"An *exact* summation."

"'madam'."

"I am sorry?"

"'An exact summation, madam'. You will end your sentences with 'madam' when speaking to me, at least for the time being."

"Yes, madam."

"Good girl. Now what is the nature of your interest? Idle curiosity, burning desire or something in between?"

"Burning desire, madam."

"Pray elaborate."

"I am not part of the late 20th century, madam. I never have been. I am looking for something sane and decent and thrilling and true; and if I have found it, I will give up all I have and strike out for the nether shore with never a backward glance, madam."

"Excellent sentiments, and charmingly expressed. Clearly you are not a newspaper reporter:—they often try to inveigle their way into our confidence, but always expose themselves by their entire ignorance of the English language. Suppose I were to invite you to visit us and step through the portal of our world?"

"That is my dearest wish, madam."

"I must warn you that the portal is a magical thing—whatever you may understand by the term 'magic'—and that once in it may not be easy, or even possible, to leave. Do not misunderstand me. There is no danger of your being held by physical force; but there are forces other than physical ones, and far more potent."

"If this world is all that I hope it to be—all that it seems to be more surely with each passing minute—then I shall have no wish to leave, madam."

"And if your path within this world be not always a happy one?"

"Is any path within any world always happy? My path in *this* world has been one of pain, and can never be otherwise. If I must suffer, let me suffer in the world of truth rather than in the world of shadows; and if my sufferings be more intense than those of the dull void of this place wherein I now exist; at least I shall be living and living fully——madam."

"Your understanding of these things is surprisingly wise and sound, my child. I am inclined to think this *is* the world you have been seeking and that you are, as we say, 'one of ours'.

"Well, then: to practicalities. In the first place, do not take too literally the word 'Edwardian' in the advertisement. It is put there partly to give an impression of the sort of régime and discipline which the servants must expect and partly to indicate that we do not belong to the present time. The reality is a little more complex; impossible to express in an advertisement or even to tell adequately at all. It must be seen and lived in order to be understood.

"However, to give you a general idea before you come, I will tell you that we inhabit a world which has elements of the Edwardian, but, in our particular case, more pervasive elements of the period between the two great modernist wars. We do not seek to imitate in all particulars any exact era; indeed, we see ourselves as belonging as much to the future as to the past, for the madness of the present period is but an aberration, and one that has already passed its peak some two decades ago. Our style is composed of many styles and each must find her own particular *nuance*. For each of us this takes time; but it is necessary that you should make a beginning before you arrive, in order that you shall not bring too alien an element into our sanctuary. Where are you now?"

"In London, madam."

"Good. And you are not hopelessly poor."

"I am reasonably provided for, madam."

"Excellent. Then you will proceed to the address I shall give you and ask for Mme. Gauvain. Tell her that you have been sent by Miss Hazeldean and are to be prepared for entry. She will instruct you and will find a style for you with which you may begin."

Chapter 2

Into the Fuchsia Tunnel

THE STREET TO WHICH LAVINIA had been directed was not difficult to find, although it was in a quiet area in North London which required a walk of two or three streets from the nearest omnibus stop. The houses were tall, prosperous-looking Victorian edifices, and, but for the ugliness of the motor-cars and the occasional denim-clad shambler, the tree-lined streets looked much as they must have done a century ago.

As she reached the street of her destination, Lavinia experienced a curious *frisson*. Years ago, she had often looked along rows of streets and mused upon what went on behind the closed doors. Surely, behind some of them existed scenes and persons which were not moulded and levelled by the mass-consciousness of the Pit; after all, she had reasoned in her adolescence, the reality one creates behind the doors of one's own castle is limited only by one's imagination and creativity and that of one's immediate associates. As years went by she was painfully to discover that this limitation of imagination was straiter and more confining than any edict which might be imposed by the sternest of tyrants; that the imagination fed on television is robbed of the power to create any reality which lies outside the confines of the suburban soul. Lately she had looked at such rows of houses with a heart filled with cheerless disdain rather than with the thrill of unlimited possibility and romantic wondering. But today that old sensation came flooding back to her with all the intensity of adolescent romance;—an intensity enhanced yet further by the consciousness of a real and imminent encounter with one of the realities which lay behind the high-gabled Victorian *façades*.

She noted the house-numbers as she approached the one which was scribbled on her little piece of paper: 78—a well-kept garden with seasonal flowers in neatly-tended beds. 76—wild and jungly. One could almost imagine the house was deserted, except that houses in this part of London do not lie empty these days. 74—this was it! The hedges were tall but not unkempt, almost as if they were grown deliberately as a screen and a defence against the outside world. Outside it were parked two cars which stood out from the others in the street. Lavinia was no

authority on motor cars, but certainly these were made before the last World War, and immediately cast an aura of reality and solidity about the place where they stood, in contradistinction to the cheap-toy atmosphere exuded by even the most expensive barbarian car. The house, like all the houses in this street, was set well back from the road, and one must make one's way between two towering walls of fuchsia-hedge which quite cut one off from the light of the sun.

As one reached the house, the world opened out again and one was in a little garden area where the sense that nothing had changed for a century struck one with renewed force. Here, nothing *had* changed and the sights and sounds of the quiet, mutedly-modern street were cut off as by an impenetrable curtain. Lavinia was conscious of the song of a bird, and the rhythmic sound of a spade turning the earth in the garden behind the house. She saw, briefly, down the drive that led to the garden, the figure of a man with some garden implement in his hand. The sight was so brief that she could not afterwards be certain of his appearance, but she was left with the impression of side-whiskers, a collarless shirt and chequered neck-cloth.

And then, equally briefly, she saw another sight which stopped her heart. High above, in a gabled attic window, she saw a face looking down at her. It was a face which was to remain etched upon her consciousness for years to come. A girl—of what age it was impossible to tell: anything between thirteen and her own age, though she was almost sure that it was a child;—but a child of a sort one does not see in these days. Her hair was fair and her eyes large and haunting. She was, perhaps, in black and with a black band in her hair, like a Victorian child in mourning; but it was those eyes which struck into Lavinia's soul. They were not the eyes of a child who has ever watched television or been exposed to the vulgar *melée* of a barbarian school; they were not the eyes of a child who has heard "the facts of life" bandied about in blasé clinical terms, or in dirty schoolyard terms; and, although she was certainly in her 'teen years they were not—not remotely—the eyes of what is called a 'teenager'. They were eyes deep with nameless yearning and with the mystery of life; they were eyes poignant with tears shed and with tears unshed; they were eyes rich with the brightness of joys and of sorrows subtler and deeper than those which touch the brash and coarsened barbarian soul.

And then she was gone. A woman, certainly in black, perhaps with a black lace veil, with her hair drawn tightly back and with a face of considerable and habitual severity, laid her hand sharply on the child's shoulder; and both were gone from the window.

Lavinia climbed the steps and struggled with a heavy, Victorian bell-

pull which at first would not move and then shot out violently, giving rise to an alarming clangour within. After not more than a few seconds, the door was opened by an imposing parlourmaid in black uniform, lace-trimmed apron and white lace cap. The maid's demeanour was aloof in the extreme. Lavinia had been worried throughout her journey that she would not make the correct impression. The whole question of her personal appearance was, she realised as soon as it had been raised, something of a problem. Still, that was the problem one was here to solve.

Clothes had not been a thing to which Lavinia had paid a great deal of attention. Of course, she had despised modern casual clothes as any sensitive person must, but she had moved largely in the realm of ideas and the rather practical question of what to wear had not much occupied her. She tended, on the whole, to wear clothes which were conservative, not particularly neat; perhaps even tending toward the drab. Oldish cardigans and nondescript skirts figured large in her wardrobe. Her clothes were not a statement of her innermost convictions; they were a trouble some necessity, or perhaps even a colourless camouflage to keep her from the attention of a world with which she desired no dealings. However, in this new world, clothes were clearly of decided importance.

"I have come to see Mme. Gauvain. Miss Hazeldean sent me."

"Very good, miss. Follow me."

As Lavinia followed the maid over the threshold, she had the distinct feeling that she had crossed an invisible barrier into another world;—that the air she was now breathing had something in common with the air breathed by that child at the window. Lavinia was conducted into a room which had some of the characteristics of a shop. There was a glass cabinet with a wooden top, which had a brass ruler fixed along the edge, like a draper's counter. There were some bolts of cloth and a wooden cabinet containing numerous small drawers with little brass handles. There were also two tailor's dummies. Behind the counter stood a woman of about fift with her hair in a bun and an old-fashioned style of clothing which Lavinia could not quite place. Before the counter was a younger woman dressed in the *chic*-est of coats, with a large, high fur-edged collar and fur-edged cuffs. Her face was powdered almost white and her lips and eyebrows painted on with doll-like precision. Her whole manner was marked by a delicate, self-conscious femininity which Lavinia had noticed sometimes in the women in up-to-date films, but never in living, modern women, whose style and movements are so little different from those of men. It was the first time she had observed the effects of what is sometimes called 'the cult of femininity'—a

thing with which she was to become more intimately acquainted in the near future.

The proprietress glanced across at Lavinia, decided that she did not merit her immediate attention, and continued to attend to her *cliente*, who was engaged in a careful examination of a pair of stockings of the most exquisite fineness. Lavinia watched her movements as she drew the delicate garment over her hand, examining the heel, the seam, and assessing the near-transparent quality of the fine-spun silk as a connoisseur might savour the colour and bouquet of a rare wine. Something in this woman fascinated her; but her reverie was interrupted by a young girl assistant hovering beside her, as if unable to speak until she had won attention by her silent presence. As soon as Lavinia looked directly at her, she ventured to say: "How may I be of service to Mademoiselle?"

It was a curious sensation. Lavinia had never been addressed in quite this way before. Shop assistants in general tended to be uninterested or overfamiliar, brash or bored or just neutral—they behaved toward one just as they wished to behave, or as their temperament directed them; they were suffused entirely with the democratic spirit and looked on one as more or less an equal. Even the most obsequious assistants in the best establishments were merely obsequious. It was a manner. They did not really consider one their superior—or at most, only a little bit their superior, if they happened to be impressed by one's accent and manner and thought one might be the daughter of Some One Important. They certainly did not seem to look on one as a different class of being, towering above them and existing only to be served; yet that was how this particular assistant seemed to look upon Lavinia,—her less-than-perfect attire notwithstanding,—and she felt a sense of pleasure and rightness. This, she felt, was how people *should* be whose business was to serve—and the lower classes in general.

The girl stood submissively, waiting for her answer. There was a certain, rather attractive, feeling of anxiety to please, as if the smallest complaint about her conduct from a *cliente*, reasonable or unreasonable, justified or unjustified, would bring some sharp chastisement upon her.

"I wish to see Madame Gauvain," said Lavinia, feeling the mantle of command about her shoulders, and standing, unconsciously, a little more erect.

A look of sweet nervousness entered the girl's eyes. "Madame is occupied for this moment. Is Mademoiselle pleased to wait?" She seemed much concerned that Mademoiselle should be pleased and not displeased.

Mademoiselle considered the matter. Was she pleased? She watched the girl's pretty face, the slight movement of the lip as if a nervous habit

of biting it were being instinctively suppressed. She watched the little white hands, kept carefully still in front of the charming, dark blue velvet 1930s dress. She prolonged the moment as far as possible before replying with courtly magnanimity: "Thank you, I am happy to wait." On a little table was a small, white magazine with a curious silhouette on the cover, entitled *Imperial Angel*, but Lavinia could not read now.

After a few minutes, the *cliente*, her parcels neatly wrapped and carried before her to her car, left the room. As she went she looked directly at Lavinia as if taking her in with a single intelligent glance. She was not, Lavinia thought, exactly beautiful, but was most poignantly pretty—with a prettiness that conjured up sleigh-rides and Christmas shopping, Autumn walks and Summer punt-rides and a whole world of better, happier days—an almost unbearable, unreachable happiness that stabbed deep into the heart.

"You wish to see me, Mademoiselle?" It was the voice of the proprietress. So many strong sensations had assailed Lavinia's breast in the few minutes since she had passed through the green-and-red fuchsia tunnel into this world, that she hardly knew where she was. She felt as if she had been given some drug, and, indeed, were it not for its manifest impossibility, would have suspected that she had been. "You wish to see me, Mademoiselle?" This time the 'Mademoiselle' was no longer a title of infinite respect. It had a faintly derisive quality. It meant 'young woman'.

"Yes. Miss Hazeldean sent me—Miss Hazeldean of P—— House— She said that you were to——" the words now seemed strange and awkward,"——to prepare me for entry."

"To prepare you for entry," said Mme. Gauvain in a neutral tone which yet managed to convey the air of one who has been given an out-of-season neck of mutton with which to prepare a repast for royalty; and then, briskly, as if it should have been done half an hour ago: "Well then, take off the coat."

This was the moment Lavinia had been dreading. She had no idea what to wear, and had eventually settled for the most respectable, conservative, new-looking blouse and skirt in her wardrobe. They were not calculated to impress, but at least they should not provoke shrieks of horror. Mme Gauvain made no comment upon them, which seemed almost a compliment.

"Well then, take those off too."

Lavinia unbuttoned the blouse and slipped the skirt over her hips. She stood in a short, white nylon full-slip with a lacy hem. A torrent of violent French expletives rent the air.

"*Sacre*—— What have you got on your legs?"

"Just tights——," replied Lavinia uncertainly, wondering whether they were the cause of this storm or whether something else was at issue.

"‘Just tights’," mimicked Mme. Gauvain. "‘What are you doing?’—— ‘Just murder’. And you think no one can see that you are wearing these tights? You think it is a secret? They have only to look at your ankles or the back of your knees to see this horrid clinging stuff with no crinkle—that is if their eyes are too poor to discern the rudeness of the tissue. You might as well walk the road in the naked."

All this was puzzling to Lavinia who did not, of course, realise the importance of fine hose in the culture she was entering, and in this house above all; nor the abhorrence in which tights were held as representative of the unspeakable 1960s and of the entire degradation of womanhood since that time. Mme. Gauvain took from one drawer a flat, white cardboard box and from another a small white silken garment and gave both to Lavinia. "Go behind the screen and wear these," she said.

Lavinia retired behind the silk-panelled screen, slipped off the offending tights and examined her new acquisitions. The white garment was a satiny suspender belt which she quickly put on and the cardboard packet contained a pair of stockings. They were not silk ones—Mme. Gauvain felt it would be a kind of sacrilege to put on something truly exquisite immediately after those things, but they were very fine nylons, fully fashioned, free from a hint of stretchiness, and therefore needing to be exactly the correct size (which Mme. Gauvain's expert eye could judge at a glance), sheer as cobweb and with proper toes and heels and real seams (one could see the turned-over nylon on each side of the seam). Lavinia pulled the first one carefully over the toes of her left foot and drew it cautiously up to her knee. It was so fine that she felt as if the slightest rough movement would ladder it, then she drew it gingerly over her knee and up her long, white thigh, watching her leg subtly change colour as it was encased in a sheer, ætherial mesh, which became hard and smooth as the soft flesh filled the soft nylon and stretched it taut, and yet remained so subtle and fine as to be almost non-existent. Only the slightly darker welt of the top few inches seemed to possess a real and earthly substance. She slipped the little white rubber button of the suspender behind it and fastened the shining metal clip over it, pulling firmly so that the button was covered with a drum-tight film of nylon. She felt the elastic pull of the suspender-strap, the only part of the *ensemble* which had the slightest give, and noticed the slight folds or creases forming about the suspender-clip as the stretchless nylon stocking-top was pulled into a peak by the strong, no-nonsense

elastic. As she completed the second stocking, she felt the curious sensation of real, sheer, stretchless nylon—her legs felt at once a strange coolness and a strange warmth; her upper thighs were squeezed to a slight but noticeable feminine swelling. She slipped her shoes on hurriedly as Mme. Gauvain called: "Come, come!"

Lavinia stepped from behind the screen, her newly-encased legs strange and elegant beneath her short nylon slip, her tights in her hand.

"Take those things, Alouette," said Mme. Gauvain to her assistant, who respectfully relieved Lavinia of the shrunken and shapeless unfilled tights, "and burn them."

Lavinia was overwrought. At the best of times, Mme. Gauvain's unexpected tirade would have unnerved her. The tights were expensive ones which had been bought at Harrods yesterday especially for the occasion; suddenly a childish petulance rose up in her at this insult to her innocent and well-intentioned preparation. She addressed the servant herself. "No, don't burn them. You have no right—she has no right!" Almost at once she realised that she had said something terrible. She half-expected a storm of abuse and shouting, but it did not come. Instead, Mme. Gauvain spoke with an icy, restrained fury which was far more frightening.

"You countermand my orders in my own house. You come to me for instruction and you insult me." She shrugged, her face cleared and it seemed that it was over. Lavinia hesitated. Was she expected to leave? Had she better put her clothes back on? After a moment, Mme. Gauvain spoke in a calm, businesslike voice. "Now, stand just here." It seemed that she was simply going to resume the fitting—or whatever it was—after all. Lavinia took the place indicated, a little in front of the counter. "Feet together. Good. Now whatever you do, you must not move your feet. Keep them exactly there. Do you understand? Good." Mme. Gauvain pushed Lavinia's shoulders until she was tilted so far forward from the waist that she must put her hands on the counter for support. "Good." She then pushed her firmly in the middle of the back until, to maintain her balance and keep her feet from moving, she must adopt a curious, duck-like posture with her back arched inwards and her bottom jutting deliberately out. "Straighten the legs!" She did so, feeling a painful strain in her calf muscles. "Good, now hold that posture and do not move at all, *not at all*, do you understand? Good."

Mme. Gauvain stepped to the counter and picked up an object which Lavinia had seen but had not recognised. It was a light, thin, whale-bone switch, about eighteen inches long and covered with tiny plaiting of the thinnest, finest leather. It was so flexible that it could easily be bent into a complete circle. Mme. Gauvain flexed it in her hands and

then cut the air with it. It made a high, whistling hiss, and for the first time, Lavinia began to understand what was happening.

Before she had time to speak or move, Mme Gauvain had tucked inward the back of the short, nylon slip, exposing her thighs between the lace edge of her white cotton knickers and the dark tops of her stockings. The switch whistled again, and this time bit into Lavinia, leaving a livid red stripe across the soft, creamy, girlish flesh. Lavinia gasped. The sting was unbearably ferocious, as if a red-hot poker had been lain across her thighs. The world seemed to swim before her. It was a moment before she knew how to regain her breath; and that moment had hardly come before the switch hissed again. It was so thin that there was hardly any crack or slap as it hit her tender flesh, but the sting was blinding. The third cut drew an involuntary cry from her lips. "Be silent," commanded Mme Gauvain coldly.

Three more burning streaks were laid across her legs. Lavinia did not know how she stood them, nor *why* she stood them, except that there seemed nothing else to do. If she rebelled or refused to accept this extraordinary punishment, she might be expelling herself from what was, she knew, the only reality worth living for.

"Stand up," said Mme. Gauvain. Lavinia obeyed. Her face was flushed, her lips trembled and her eyes were glistening. "Little sniveller," said Mme Gauvain scornfully. "One day you will have a *real* beating. I hope it is soon." With Lavinia satisfactorily chastened, Mme. Gauvain went briskly about her business. She was truly a mistress in her chosen field, and her refined instinct swiftly discerned a style which illumined and brought to the fore something of what had lain latent in Lavinia's soul these many years:—the true self which she might have been, had not her heart's growth been stunted by formative years spent in a world where—however she may have avoided its worst corruptions—all that was fine and true in her had been forced to grow without light or air or nourishment.

The style was to a large extent that of the '20s. Her lips were rouged, though modestly. Her brows were plucked (she had instructions upon how to continue this process each day until her ideal shape was achieved) and pencilled. A deep cloche hat almost covered one eye. Her dress, though emphasising her slight, schoolgirl figure, was not in the low-waisted, flat-chested, short-skirted style of the archetypal '20s, but was a high-collared, full-skirted confection which somehow contrived to exude the *aisance* of the '20s, while in fact being fuller, richer and more romantic than the authentic style of that somewhat æsthetically-Spartan period. She recalled to mind the appearance of the previous *cliente*, which had also breathed the spirit of the '20s but in a much

richer, full-skirted, fur-trimmed style. This, she was to learn, was a great characteristic of the Empire into which she was entering. Styles of the past might be adopted, but always they were adapted—not in a way which made them more ‘modern’ in the barbarians’ sense of that term, but in ways which made them more amenable to the values of the Empire itself, and which placed upon them the indelible stamp of its characteristic style. In the case of the 1920s and ’30s, all that was theatrical, gay, stylish and stylised was happily adopted; but all the elements of stark functionalism, anti-traditionalism, moral looseness and bleak, levelling democracy which characterised those inter-war styles were skilfully edited out and replaced by fresh elements of flamboyance, richness or demure modesty.

But it was in her subtlety, above all, that Mme. Gauvain’s genius lay. While, in terms of broad description, the style of the previous *cliente* and that which she had given to—or rather, drawn from—Lavinia had a certain similarity, they were, in fact utterly different. The first had a delicate, china-doll prettiness, which enhanced the natural attractiveness of the subject into a breathtaking porcelain perfection, which brought out not only her woman-child playfulness, but also her child-woman wisdom and displayed, as in a splendid china-cabinet, the sweetness of her heart.

In Lavinia’s case, the style had an entirely different *nuance*. Her guiding *motif* was *naïveté* and her style looked inward rather than outward. She seemed a pretty child, a little unaccustomed to the world. This may seem no great thing; but each of Mme. Gauvain’s creations was perfect of its own kind, and the exquisite delicacy with which this modest *persona* had been realised struck Lavinia, as she looked in the full length glass, with a sensation compounded of rapture, admiration and shock. Was this really her? It looked like a completely different girl; and yet, at the same time she knew not only that it *was* her, but that it was the *real* her; the Lavinia that she should have seen in the looking-glass all along. The truth of Mme. Gauvain’s work was such as to transfix the soul with utter conviction. *This*, then, was who she was. She had often wondered, and now she knew. It might take some time to get to know herself, but at least she had seen herself for the first time.

Was there a hint of disappointment? Perhaps there was. She might have hoped to have been more flamboyant, more captivating, more like that other woman whom she had seen this morning, or at any rate, not so very *naïve* and introverted,—but there it was; there *she* was. She could learn, perhaps, to be more the way she would wish to be, but at present she must begin from here. And, after all, it was not so *very* disappointing. At least she *had* a self. A real, and rather pretty self; not a

hollow shadow-self, like all the shamblers down there beyond the fuchsia-hedge. Having lived her life down there, of course her self must be very small and under-nourished ;—but, oh ! to have a self at all ! A real self that could move and breathe, however humbly, in the same world as the woman whose parcels were carried to her car, and the girl at the window. It was as if, in that very moment, she had been born.

“Mademoiselle is pleased ?” asked Mme. Gauvain, and for the first time there was neither impatience nor irony in her voice.

“Very, *very* pleased.”

As she settled the details : the clothes which must be made for her to replace her present off-the-peg makeshift (Mme. Gauvain intimated that her present transformation was merely in the nature of a rough sketch), the underwear she would need, the outdoor coat, the make-up, the cost (oh, dear ! The cost !), she was brought into more intimate contact with Alouette who fetched things, packed things, showed her samples and performed a dozen other little offices. At first Lavinia wondered whether the sight of her punishment would have lowered her in the eyes of the assistant (Alouette had gone quietly about her business during Mademoiselle’s whipping, as if such chastening of *clientes* was nothing out of the common, though she had certainly not mortified her natural curiosity by averting her eyes as she passed) ; it seemed, however that this was by no means the case. If anything, the serving-girl was more deferential than before. Lavinia’s doubts were replaced by a warm feeling that perhaps her suffering, together with her New Look had made her something of an Insider ; perhaps she and Alouette were somewhat made kindred by their common experience of Madame’s rod. The thought embarrassed her as soon as she had framed it. It seemed at once impertinent and foolish : undoubtedly her beating had been as nothing compared to the discipline under which Alouette lived ; and, in any case, why should one wish for a sense of kinship with a mere serving-girl ?

Chapter 3

"Dove-White, Trembling Purity"

SHE THOUGHT, as she walked back through the guardian walls of fuchsia, of the girl at the window. Profoundly as she had been impressed by all that had transpired within the house, the thought of that brief meeting of eyes returned at once to haunt her. She did not, however, look back as she made her way down the deep-shadowed path. Had she done so, she had met those eyes once again, and perhaps have prevented a tear from misting them over.

When a child is playing happily in a garden at duskfall and is called for a moment into a lighted room, the dusk which had seemed so playful and alluring feels suddenly cold and dreary in contrast with the fire and candle-light. So did the world of denim and gaudy motor-cars seem to Lavinia after her little time within a world of enchantment. Even the more splendid of the two real cars which had been parked outside the house was now gone. It seemed somehow symbolic of the increased flatness of the profane world. What a curious thing is enchantment. It had by no means been an unmixedly joyful experience. She had been scorned and bullied and even—so incredibly that she would doubt her memory were it not for the hot smarting at the tops of her legs—beaten. Mme. Gauvain had been impatient, cold and abrasive, the parlourmaid had no respect for her and Alouette had respected her only because she was strictly trained to respect every one;—and yet, back in the greyness of an ordinary, rather pleasant, street, she felt almost homesick for that place as if it had been the only true home she had ever known.

The girl at the window was surrounded with an aura of inexpressible romance. She conjectured—perhaps quite wrongly—that her life might be an unhappy one; and yet she knew that, if she were offered a chance to exchange places, she would seize it without a moment's hesitation—unless she were to hesitate because she knew that she were serving the girl a most evil turn. Of course, it may be that she would soon be off upon her own adventure into enchantment—and that unburdened by whatever sorrow she imagined to lay upon the child—yet what would she not have given to have spent her formative years amid scenes,

whether happy or sad, of traditional solidity, unpoisoned by the diseased influences of barbarian mass-culture?

Fate had been more than kind to her. It seemed to have granted her—at an age that was still, after all, very young—that for which one might search for a lifetime and discover too late, if at all. She should be happy; and it was with a guilty sense of her own ingratitude that she found herself dull and depressed. The street, as she walked away from the finest Victorian houses, seemed drabber and drabber. Only her new clothes consoled her. She no longer looked a part of the dreary world about her. The warm-and-cold feeling of her 1950s nylons had taken on something of the romance of enchantment;—but her adventure was over for a whole week. Even dressed as she was, nothing of the remotest interest could possibly happen to her before her visit to P—— House. She was in a desert world, devoid of people who counted as people at all; devoid of mystery; devoid of magic; devoid of adventure. Any one who noticed her clothes and was fascinated by her style would merely be a bore and an annoyance. Pit inmates, of whatever stripe, held not the smallest interest.

It was just as she was thinking these thoughts that a noisy motor-horn jarred on her nerves, followed by the sound of a car pulling up beside her.

“What-ho, there!” called a precise feminine voice, whose delicacy made a delicious counterpoint to the jauntiness of the words. “Can I give you a lift anywhere?”

It was the other car—the one which had been parked outside the house when she had arrived: a long, square-fronted, bottle-green 1930s Rolls Bentley, and at the wheel was the *cliente* who had been before her at Mme. Gauvain’s. Had she been an angel from Heaven she could not have been a more welcome sight. Lavinia breathed a silent prayer of thanksgiving. The passenger door was thrown open and she climbed in. As she sat in the seat she let out an involuntary gasp. It was the first time she had sat down since her encounter with Mme. Gauvain’s switch, and the soreness of her upper thighs, to which she had now become more or less accustomed, suddenly leapt into throbbing life. The woman beside her laughed, though whether because she understood what had happened, Lavinia could not tell. “Where to?” she asked. Lavinia showed her an envelope on which Mme. Gauvain had written the address of a hairdresser. Inside were precise instructions as to the style which should be created.

The engine purred into wakefulness and the car set off. Lavinia felt that it seemed more like a real *place* than a barbarian car. The upright seats were like real chairs, the high-roofed, spacious interior was more

like a room than a little tin box, the smell of leather, and the polished wooden dashboard with its neat, chromium-mounted instruments had an air of furnishing rather than of mere gadgetry. She was later to discover that this was the case with even the most modest up-to-date motor car. The Bentley, of course, was more grand and opulent, but even the popular models of Ford or Austin had a sense of human dignity and civilisation before the Eclipse. They were machines made for dignified human beings, not machines which expected people to crush themselves into their low contours and accept as æsthetic value whatever chanced to be technical and commercial convenience.

The soreness of her thighs was beginning to subside again, and her legs felt once more luxurious and sophisticated. She noticed the crinkle at her heel which Mme. Gauvain had spoken of, then she looked at the driver's ankles and saw the similar, though slightly different, crinkle of her silken hose. Mme. Gauvain was right. It was quite unmistakable. No one who had the smallest discernment could possibly mistake a pair of tights or barbarian stretch stockings for the real thing, even at a glance. The gossamer sheen of silk or up-to-date nylon; the firm, shimmering surface, created from the tension of the ætherial yet unyielding film, held taut by the inner pressure of feminine flesh, was a subtle and perfect blending of art and nature to which the dull cling of the barbarian counterfeit did not even pay the flattery of reasonable imitation.

The driver turned her foot elegantly on the pedal, affording a glance of her die-straight seam, as if aware and not displeased that her rather delightful calves and ankles were the subject of rapt scrutiny. Lavinia wished, with an intensity that surprised her, that she might glimpse the little crinkles behind her companion's knee, and realised, with a sense of frustration which was somehow not wholly displeasing, that such a blessing was one which circumstance allowed but rarely, if at all.

"Thank you for the lift," she said, remembering her manners.

"Not at all," said her companion. "We Imperials always help one another, what?"

"Imperials?"

"Subjects of the Great Celestial Empire and all that sort of thing. But I suppose you don't know you are one yet." Her voice was like a silver bell,

"Am I?" asked Lavinia, hardly noticing the import of the words in her admiration of the voice.

"Oh, yes. No one asks your consent. I mean, why should they? It is fate. You are born One of Ours or you aren't. One looks down a street and sees a desert place. If there is but one other Imperial in a crowd of natives, the two of you are alone in emptiness. No one chooses you;

you do not choose yourself. You are picked out of the sea of life by the nameless necessity of your own inward being, what?"

"I like that. It is closer to poetry. Your voice was made to speak nothing but poetry." It was a daring thing to say; and yet, why should one not say it? All her life she had suppressed the rich and eloquent thoughts within her and substituted the colourless banalities of barbarian discourse. Where else, if not here in the enchanted world, could one speak one's soul?

"I say, you *are* a chap." She said no more, as if waiting for Lavinia to let off another firework. Lavinia playfully returned to the every-day.

"How lucky that you were passing as I came out of Mme. Gauvain's."

"Not luck entirely. You interested me in there, and, to tell the truth, I was rather curious to see what sort of a swan Mme. Gauvain would turn you into. So I gave you an hour and coasted back this way. I thought, if fate wanted the meeting it would take place, and it appears fate did; though I must admit that Mme. Gauvain is not usually much over or under an hour with a newie."

"And what sort of a swan has she made of me?"

"Rather a white and downy one. Very much of an *ingénue*. Perhaps a shade *gauche*, but very pleasingly so. How does it feel?"

"Delicious. I only wish it were true."

"Oh, it is true enough. Madame is never wrong."

"But I, an *ingénue*? I have seen things and heard things which have poisoned my innocence for ever."

"Have you?" said the driver, laughing her silvery laugh. "Have you lived among the *apaches* in the slums of Paris, and worked your way through the *bordellos* of Siam? Were you taken by white slavers at the age of twelve to live a life of nameless infamy in Cairo? I never should have thought it,—but there: if you can deceive Mme. Gauvain, no doubt it is no difficult matter to deceive me." It seemed but banter: an attempt at consolation through gentle mockery and an enjoyment of word and image for their own sake, and yet it touched, with an unerring touch, upon a deep well of unspoken anger and of unshed tears. The outburst it provoked was neither expected nor unexpected.

"My mind has been raped by television; by the grinning and gibbering monkeys of barbarian foulness. My soul has been soiled and spotted by filthy words and filthy thoughts spoken by educated cretins to whom filth is as bland and commonplace as the air they breathe."

"Yes," said her companion wistfully. "There is that wonderful phrase, 'a sheltered childhood'. What a depth of trembling, dove-white purity that phrase conveys. And yet it is all gone; smirched and pilaged, like a temple sacked by barbarians. No one can be said to have

had a sheltered childhood if there was a television in the house. The little girls in their velours and pleated skirts have been privy to the nastiest thoughts of the lecherous tramp by the roadside and the worse lecher in the college chambers. Their little eyes, that should be bright with the freshness of the world, have a knowing look that chills the heart, like the flash of a gold tooth in the mouth of a new-born infant."

"There you are!" cried Lavinia. "You understand perfectly, for all your rot about *apaches* and white slavers. So how can I be an *ingénue*?"

"Yes," said her companion thoughtfully, "I wonder how you can."

The engine hummed for a minute or so, and then she spoke again. "Perhaps it is that you knew you were being poisoned. Your very being tensed against it. You felt ill. Your soul rejected it as your body might reject a material poison. It has not been a pleasant experience—nausea never is—but you are clean. You are an *ingénue*—or as near to it as is possible under the conditions."

"I have seen a real *ingénue* today," said Lavinia quietly. "Upstairs at Mme. Gauvain's house."

The queerest of looks passed over the serenely pretty countenance of the driver, and she affected to have heard nothing. "So, now that we have bared our jolly little souls, perhaps we should introduce ourselves. You first, as I am the elder."

"Miss Lavinia Delacourt."

"Lady Chelverton. Actually I am not taking you to that hairdresser."

"Kidnapped already, my lady. What fun! Not Cairo, I hope."

"I fear not. One cannot sell an *ingénue* at her true value these days; they have not the discernment. So it is merely a different hairdresser."

"What is wrong with Madame's hairdresser, my lady?"

"She is excellent, of course; but she is a brute. She specialises in the most exquisitely painful razor-cutting. Legend has it that she dulls the razor purposely because she enjoys making girls cry—and, of course, you cannot help your eyes crying when your hairs are being individually and systematically pulled to the roots. I do hope I am doing the right thing. Nearly every one has suffered at the hands of Antoinette. It is like a part of the initiation ceremony. Perhaps without it your initiation will not 'take' and you will end up drubbed out of the Empire and cast into the cold, cold snow."

"I had rather endure a thousand razor-cuttings than that, my lady," said Lavinia with a real chill in her voice.

Lady Chelverton's laugh rang like a crystal wind-chime. "It is merely my fancy, little one."

"I hope so, my lady," said Lavinia, whose own fancy had suddenly conjured a dark sense of prophecy into those light words.

"You are very punctilious about calling me 'my lady', little one."

"Does it please you, my lady?"

"Yes, it does. Would you like to serve me?"

'Serve me'—what did that mean? Perform some little service for her? Become her lady's maid and devote her life to the care of her clothes and her hair? Scrub floors and peel potatoes in her kitchen?

"Yes, my lady."

Lady Chelverton opened her little tooled leather clasp with one hand, and extracted three things, one by one: two rather sumptuous silver-and-enamel Art Deco cases and a long ebony-and-silver cigarette holder. One of the cases was a cigarette case, the other a lighter.

"Light me a cigarette," said Lady Chelverton. Lavinia opened the case and extracted a long, thin, rather unusual-looking cigarette from behind the band which held them in place. After a little experimenting she discovered how to produce a flame from the lighter, and then tried to light the cigarette. Nothing she did would make it stay alight. The delicate, wind-chime laugh thrilled her soul once more. "Oh, how precious you are, little one! Do not you know that you cannot light a cigarette without drawing on it?"

"With my breath?"

"Yes, with your breath, you funny little goose. But do put it in the holder. I dislike to see a girl sucking on a naked cigarette. It looks so ordinary."

"Yes, my lady." Lavinia fitted the cigarette into the holder and lit it. She drew in the smoke deeply and went into a fit of coughs. Lady Chelverton laughed once more.

"Oh, I was right about you. No one could buy you at your true value. No one could afford you. You are perfect. Truly."

"Your cigarette, my lady."

"Thank you, little one. Now, what are you frowning at. Have I offended your girlish pride?"

"No, my lady."

"What then?"

"I am not sure if it is my place to say, my lady."

"Of course it is. You are not *really* my servant."

"Well, I am not certain that I like to see you smoking."

"Really? Why not, my strange child?"

"Um—it isn't good for you, my lady."

"Not good for me? I have always believed that tobacco was absolutely stuffed to the gills with medicinal properties."

"Oh no. Have you not seen the warnings on the packet, my lady."

"What packet?"

"The packet the cigarettes come in, my lady."

"Do cigarettes come in packets? How quaint. I have never seen one. My lady's maid always puts them into my case for me. Are they worth seeing, these packets?"

"No, my lady."

"Then do not regale me with these sordid details of barbarian commercial and Governmental low-life. In any case, I do not believe in your medicinal hypothesis—either its truth or that it is the real reason for your objection to my smoking. Try again."

"Well, it does not seem to go with you, somehow."

"Much better. You think I am a sort of Christmas-tree fairy. I fill your little heart with thoughts of log fires and endless Summer days. I should be prettiness and purity and truth; a sort of virgin motherliness; not a sophisticated lady who smokes cigarettes."

"Yes. Yes, you should, my lady."

"Good girl. A bongo would have been cowed by my words. 'How can we ask any one to be an Ideal?' 'Each of us is an individual with her own needs'. But you are right. We should enact the Ideal that is in us, or we are nothing. You have a right to demand it. How can I justify my existence in this world if I do not strive to embody the truth that you and others have seen in me?"

"My lady, I did not mean——"

"Yes you did. Or at least, that was implicit in your words, whether you realised it or not; and you are right." She drew on her cigarette, the holder poised elegantly between her fingers. The scented smoke tinted the air inside the car with a fragrance quite unlike any that Lavinia had smelt before. "But I do not smoke in an ordinary way. I am a *gourmet*, not a *gourmand*. I do not take more than one or two in a day, and sometimes not so many in a week. I do not smoke when no one is watching me. That would be like drinking Chartreuse in one's *boudoir*. Dear Oscar Wilde said that smoking—he meant, of course, fine cigarettes like these; not the dreadful things the barbarians smoke—that smoking 'is the perfect type of the perfect pleasure. It is exquisite and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more could one ask for?'

"Can you understand that?"

"Yes, my lady, I think I can."

Chapter 4

The Severity of the China Doll

“MISS LAVINIA DELACOURT,” announced the maid. Lavinia entered the room, her hair trained exactly into its short side-curls, and her neo-’20s ensemble complete down to her splendid, full-skirted, high-collared overcoat. A tall woman with raven hair drawn back into a French roll came forward to greet her. The woman’s dress combined elements of the Edwardian and of several Victorian periods. Her elaborate collar and great pagoda sleeves, together with her imposing stature and her upright bearing, gave her the air of a very powerful figure from an world which has more grandeur and a greater sense of its own *reality* than our the Pit. If Lavinia had expected in any sense to be stepping from the ‘real world’ into a world of ‘fantasy’, she found that the very reverse was the case. Here was reality of an order that simply did not exist among the cheap trivialities of the world below. Mme. Gauvain’s had been rather like that, of course; but here was a sense that one was entering a world of much greater form and ceremony; a world where any move one made, however small, might transpire, for reasons one could scarcely guess at, to be a most reprehensible gaffe.

The woman took both the girl’s hands in hers. “Miss Delacourt,” she said, “how very, very charming.” And, indeed, Lavinia did look very, very charming. Her awe and her nervousness were the final touch needed to perfect what Lady Chelverton might have called her dove-white, adolescent *miroir*. She stood, suddenly—the false maturity of her but half-lived former life stripped away from her like a meaningless dream—trembling on the brink of puberty. Her ears were hot beneath her deep cloche hat. She hoped she was not blushing.

There was a tea-table, and two women from a period later than that of the woman who had greeted her—from the ’20s or the ’30s—were drinking tea. They were much older than she;—not in years, but in grown-upness. They talked cleverly, wittily; their conversation was like a brilliant performance. They greeted her charmingly. She heard their names and forgot them immediately, remembering only the name of the hostess, who had greeted her: Miss Hazeldean. She felt like a child at

an adult tea, except that these were *real* adults, of a kind that had not existed in her world: imposing, certain, complete. She noticed again the cult of femininity that she had seen in Lady Chelverton. Their gestures were precise, curvilinear and delicate, not like the broad, half-mannish gestures of neutered barbarian women. Their voices were delicate and careful, even though they were chattering spiritedly; their posture was posed and self-conscious, even though they were, in their own terms, relaxed. Lavinia felt more *gauche* than ever. Everything had a rushing, floating, fever-dream quality in Lavinia's mind, though she knew that, to those about her, all was perfectly normal. She tried to join the conversation, but could think of nothing to say, and, it seemed to her, no particular opening was made for her. Miss Hazeldean left the room, and she was alone with the two younger women from between the wars. Alone with them? It seemed a curious way to see it, but, with the departure of the older, more authoritative woman there seemed to be something of a change of atmosphere; almost as if the mistress had left the classroom;—or rather, as if she had left a common-room where she had been conversing with two sophisticated sixth-form girls, courteously treating them as adults, almost as equals, though all, of course, knew that they were not;—and as if, now that she had left, they sighed a little with relief and resumed their citizenship of the world between childhood and adulthood. The atmosphere was a touch lighter and less restrained, and for the first time, the two women turned their attention properly toward Lavinia. Oh, yes, they *were* adults and not children. Adults such as Lavinia had not seen before; and yet there was a lightness, a *fantaisie*, about their manner of a kind which she had not seen before either.

"Miss Lavinia Delacourt," said the fair-haired one, the elder of the two. She said it as if it were the name of some unfamiliar species, and she said no more, but continued to look enquiringly at the new girl.

"I am sorry. I must seem a bit quiet," said Lavinia.

"Of course you are quiet. You should be quiet. Children should speak when they are spoken to." Slowly, as through the mists of dream, the speaker slid into focus. Until now the two young women had been almost indistinguishable; part of a strange ritual taking place before her. But now one of them stood out as an individual. She was blonde—intensely blonde, about thirty, elegantly attired in a '20s cocktail dress with tiny pleats in its short sleeves. Her demeanour was calm, self-possessed and gently mocking. "How old are you?" she asked.

"Nearly twenty," said Lavinia. Her questioner pursed her lips and looked at her friend. Her friend was brunette, much younger, much more sympathetic-looking; rather childlike herself, but still very self-

possessed. She looked half amused, half disapproving. The blonde girl was not amused at all. She turned a disdainful glance upon Lavinia.

"It is a very bad beginning to tell stories like that ; and such *silly* stories, too. Say you are sorry."

"I am sorry," said Lavinia falteringly.

"No, that will not do at all. You aren't really sorry. We can tell you aren't, can't we, Bébé?"

"Well, weally we can, Dowinda," said Bébé primly.

"Now, one last chance to make a proper apology for telling naughty, impertinent fibs to your elders and betters."

So curious was the atmosphere that surrounded her, and so phantasmagoric her own state of mind that she hardly knew whether they were teasing her or whether she was really being naughty, at least within their terms. The most natural thing was to accept all as it was presented to her. "I am really very sorry," she said. "I will try very hard to be good and truthful." This time she sounded—and perhaps felt ; not even she was quite sure—really contrite. Bébé emitted a squeal of delighted laughter.

"Be silent, Bébé," said Dorinda severely. "Lavinia, you must apologise to Miss Bébé as well."

Her ears were hotter than ever as she turned to the glittery-eyed brunette who was clearly laughing at her. "I am very sorry for being impertinent to you, Miss Bébé." Bébé smiled with pleasure and amusement. 'Miss Bébé' was an unaccustomed and rather frivolous dignity. She was simply Bébé to every one except strangers and the servants, and they used her surname. Dorinda, however, betrayed not the smallest pleasure or amusement. "Now, let me ask you again. How old are you?"

"Um, fifteen, I think."

"You *think* ? Do you not know your own age, child?"

"I—I am almost sure." Bébé pressed her handkerchief to her mouth.

"What a *splendid* achievement for a child of fifteen. Do you know your *alphabet*?"

"Of course I do."

"Fortunately for you, child, I do not believe I quite heard you. Do you know your alphabet?"

"Yes, Miss Dorinda."

"Recite it, then."

Lavinia chanted: "Eh, bee, see, dee, ee, eff, gee, aitch, aye, jay, kay, ell, em, en, oh, pea, queue, are, ess, tea, you, vee, double-you, ex, why, zed."

"Good girl. Are you sure you are fifteen?"

"No, not sure." How could she be sure? Her voice was frank and

childlike. Why have opinions of one's own about things one did not know? Dorinda smiled.

"Do you know any nursery rhymes?"

"Oh, yes."

"Which?"

"'Twinkle, twinkle' and——"

"Let us have 'Twinkle, twinkle'."

"Twinkle, twinkle little star,
How I wonder what you are——"

"No, no. Not reciting. Singing."

There are few things more mortifying to most English souls than the prospect of exposing one's singing voice before strangers, unfortified by strong drink. Lavinia just could not do it. It was like trying to jump down one stair too many. An invisible force prevented her.

"Lavinia, we are waiting to hear you."

Lavinia retreated into a childish pose which would have shocked her a quarter of an hour ago, but seemed now quite natural—or as natural as anything seemed. She clasped her hands behind her back, tilted her body awkwardly and said "Can't."

"Lavinia!" said Dorinda, in the tone reserved for disobedient dogs and infants, "Do as you are told."

"Twinkle, twinkle——" began Lavinia in embarrassed haste.

"No, not like that, Lavinia. Slowly, tunefully. Let us hear your very best singing. Now, stand up straight, take a deep breath, and begin."

Her voice was quite a sweet one, but completely unpractised. Even so, she might have done better was not her throat so dry and her body so shaken with nervousness, and had she not been able to see, out of the corner of her eye, Béb  watching her intently, with her pretty, folded handkerchief never far from her mouth, and often pressed suddenly to her lips. She wavered about the notes and once her voice cracked completely, causing B   's head to dip toward the handkerchief, rather than raising the handkerchief to her mouth. She ended with a feeling of unutterable relief that she had it over with, but her relief was premature.

"I am sure you can do better than that," said Dorinda, "would you like another try?" How awful. Fancy *saying* how bad it was.

"I think I can do it better tomorrow."

"Do not be silly, child. Now, deep breath and sing again."

Lavinia sang again. Her nerve was quite gone and it was worse than before. B   's composure was a lost cause. This time her face was half-buried in her handkerchief and her shoulders were shaking.

"No, it still will not do," said the pitiless Dorinda. "I *know* you can sing better than that."

How many times was it? Three? Four? Long enough to seem like a whole afternoon; not long enough for the mortification to wear off. At last she got through the song fairly creditably, if a little hoarsely.

"Much better," said Dorinda. "Here is a little reward for you." She took a sugar-lump from the bowl and held it out on the palm of her hand to Lavinia. Lavinia did not actually want to take it, but thought she had better. She reached out her hand, but Dorinda's fingers closed over the treat.

"Not like that. Eat it out of my hand." She held it up to Lavinia, so that she had only to bend a little way, but as she bent down, Dorinda lowered her hand, so that Lavinia was on her knees before she could reach the sugar, with her head beside Dorinda's lap. She took it carefully with her lips so as not to wet Dorinda's hand.

"Good girl," said Dorinda. "Now, stand up and let us see your pretty frock." Lavinia stood up. Her coat had been taken by a serving-girl, but she had kept on her cloche hat and white gloves. Her dress was tight-bodiced and full-skirted, in a pale powder-blue satin. Seen in a particular way, it looked rather like a child's Sunday-and-visiting frock, a *nuance* that had, no doubt, been part of Mme. Gauvain's intent. "Turn about." Lavinia turned. The skirt floated a little, supported by three layers of net petticoat. "Silk stockings. How very grown-up. No." Dorinda ran her finger from below Lavinia's knee to her stocking-top beneath her skirts, feeling the crisp, firm surface of the nylon film and making a shiver pass over Lavinia's body. "No, not silk; only nylons. But very charming ones. Who has dressed you?"

"Madame Gauvain."

"Oh, Madame Gauvain. Little girls must behave themselves for Madame Gauvain, or she gives them a taste of her switch. Have you had a taste of Madame Gauvain's switch, little girl?"

Lavinia flushed deeply and twisted on the soles of her pretty little bow-topped shoes. She felt she could not answer, yet she knew she would be made to. She was wrong. Dorinda was not inclined to make her answer. The answer, in any case, was obvious. Lavinia had thought that nothing could be worse than this pressing attention from Dorinda, but at once she realised that something could be worse. Dorinda was beginning to look bored.

"Are you refusing to answer me again? You are a stupid, dull little child. You are pretty and well-dressed, but you are not interesting. Go and stand in the corner." Lavinia stood stupidly for a moment, but she had lost Dorinda's attention. "Go on!" she repeated snappishly, but without looking at her. She began to converse with Bébé. She had not even indicated which corner Lavinia was to stand in. There she was, in a

large strange room, suddenly ignored, reduced to a nonentity, and afraid lest she should bring back Dorinda's attention upon her in this mood. She found herself a dark corner over by the French windows and turned her face to the wall. She clasped her hands behind her back and tried to stand straight and demurely, but it did not seem to matter what she did now. No one was interested in her any more. It was a large room and she had positioned herself at the furthest point away from the tea-table. She very soon began to wish she had not done so, for Dorinda and Béb  were talking in an intimate undertone and she could not catch more than one word in a score, and the conversation seemed rather charming and intriguing. She was annoyed with herself. She could have chosen any corner. She could have been in the light and have stayed just on the edge of things, still hearing what was taking place, but in her panic, she had scurried to a far corner and placed herself in exile. Again and again as time ticked by, she wondered whether she dare edge to a nearer corner. They probably would not notice :—but what if they did? Once she stole a glance over her shoulder and saw them deep in conversation, but although that glance had been safe, she dared not look again. She felt an inexplicable dread of being caught in an act of disobedience.

After what seemed an age, the door opened, and at the same instant, Dorinda called gently : “Lavinia !” Lavinia turned just as her hostess entered the room.

“I am sorry to have been so long delayed,” said Miss Hazeldean. “A business matter which may be of interest to Miss Carleton as well as to myself. Lavinia, do join us and stop hovering at the edge of the room.”

“She is rather shy,” said Dorinda.

“Charming, I am sure,” said Miss Hazeldean, “but it can be overdone. Perhaps, B   , you would like to show Miss Delacourt a little of the grounds while I speak of business to Miss Carleton for a moment. I am sure it will interest neither of you.” B    tripped over to the French windows, opened them and stepped out onto the verandah. Lavinia followed her.

The house was set in ample grounds : not a great estate, but several acres, bordered by high stone walls, making it very much a world of its own. From the verandah one looked across well-kept lawns to a summer-house and a little spinney.

“Shall we walk over to the summer-house ?” asked B   . Alone she seemed quite ordinary and approachable. Ordinary ? No, not that. Every word, every gesture, every tone of voice was carefully poised, giving her the air of a delicate, Oriental marionette in some highly stylised ritual play. And yet, here she was—not holding one off, not mocking or scolding or standing aloof ; just suggesting a walk to the

summer house, as if to be a stylised marionette were a natural, everyday thing to be, or as if Lavinia had been another marionette like herself.

"Do you like the grounds?"

"Yes."

"You have not seen the best places. You have not seen the Japanese garden, or the wosawy."

"I like the grounds because they are well ordered and secluded."

"You like order, then, and you like seclusion?"

"Yes. I like those things."

"You will find them here. As much of each as you could wish. More than you may wish."

"How very sinister you make it sound, Bébé. Am I entering a gothic novel?"

"Oh no. There will be no stwange happenings. One could wish for more stwange happenings. Weally one could."

"And what of the way Dorinda treated me indoors?"

"Oh, well, yes. If you find *that* stwange, then you *may* be in for a stwange old time." Bébé evidently found this rather amusing.

"Can you explain it to me?" asked Lavinia, taking care to ask in the tone of one asking for a mathematical equation to be explained, and keeping the smallest hint of challenge out of her voice.

"Explain it? What is there to explain?" Her face was a mask of porcelain perfection, impervious to intrusions from another world.

"Well, how old do *you* think I am?"

"I don't know. Fourteen, fifteen—thirteen perhaps. I thought fifteen was a bit of a fib, weally." They had reached the summer-house, which had a broad wooden verandah with wicker chairs and a table. "Shall we have tea? I know we have just had some, but it will be wather fun to have our own tea-party here, won't it?"

"Oh, yes, that will be charming." Bébé pulled a rope which led to a little bell-turret mounted, like a gable, on the roof of the summer house. A bell clanged sonorously. Bébé sat down in one of the wicker chairs, crossing her silken legs and elegantly feeling her perfect bob for an invisible stray hair. Lavinia took another chair near to her. She wished to pursue the question of how Bébé saw her, but she did not want to seem like a crass outsider unable to take up the game (if it *was* a game) easily and intelligently.

"Why did you call me 'Bébé'?" asked Bébé suddenly. "You were supposed to call me 'Miss Bébé'."

"I am sorry. 'Bébé' seemed natural."

"Who told you to be natuwal with me? Dowinda made you call me

'Miss Bébé' and you just *decided* to call me 'Bébé'. That is almost the same as disobeying her."

A maidservant came across the grass in a brisk walk which was almost, but not quite, a run, covering the ground as swiftly as possible without loss of decorum. She stood silently before the verandah awaiting her orders. Lavinia noted that, unlike the other maidservant she had seen—the one who had let her in and taken her case—this one had a small steel band about her left ankle. It fitted quite closely over her black nylon stocking, and there seemed to be no obvious way to remove it. Lavinia wondered whether she had carefully to work her stocking under the anklet each morning, after putting it on her foot and before drawing it up her leg, or whether she had some way of removing it. Somehow she sensed that the anklet was *not* removable—not by its owner at least—or, should one say, not by its *wearer*.

"Bwing tea for two," said Bébé, hardly glancing at the girl.

"Very good, miss," said the girl, and hurried away without a moment's hesitation.

"Pway do not look so shocked," said Bébé. "She is only a slave-girl. It is not *done* to say 'please' or 'thank you' to slave-girls. They are not the same as the servants, any more than the servants are the same as you or me. You will learn. But you need not think I am forgetting about your naughtiness. How would you like me to tell Dowinda that you disobeyed her?"

"No, please don't," said Lavinia, partly because this seemed to be the response that was wanted and partly because she really would prefer Dorinda not to be told.

"You do not want me to tell her?"

"No, really I don't."

"You aren't a vewy well-disciplined child, are you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know. There is not much you *do* know, is there? You do not even know your own age."

The serving-girl returned with a tea-tray, and placed it on the table.

"There is no sugar," said Bébé. The girl looked panic-stricken. "It is no good looking at me like that. There is no sugar. I know I do not take it, but Miss Delacourt might. Go back and get some."

"Very good, miss." The girl turned away with considerable relief.

"Oh, girl!"

"Yes miss?"

"Report that I am displeased with you."

The fearful look returned to her eyes, but her tone showed nothing.

"Very good, miss."

"Now, where were we?" said Bébé. "Oh yes, so you do not know your age or whether you are well-disciplined. Well, when was the last time you were caned?"

"I am not sure." She was wondering whether her punishment at the hands of Mme. Gauvain counted as being 'caned'. She thought probably not. A caning sounded rather heavier and more terrifying than that. Something you waited for outside a headmistress's room in fear and trembling.

"So, you do not know *that* either. Are you an idiot-child?"

"I don't think so."

Bébé laughed. "Not even sure of that! At least you are honest! Perhaps you would be better off with a chain round your ankle. It could happen you know."

An icy fear gripped Lavinia's heart. Could it happen? Presumably they could not hold her in slavery against her will, but if they told her that was the condition of her remaining in this world, what would she do? She could not go back to that other world. She knew that. So why was she behaving like such a stupid outsider. Why was she not throwing herself fully into the 'game' and acting within its terms. Since this *was*, for better or worse, her fate, why not show herself worthy of it rather than make a bad impression at the start which might prejudice her whole position?

"Oh come on, tell me when you were last caned and do not be silly."

"Never, Miss Bébé. I never have been caned."

Bébé pursed her stylised, painted lips. "I find that rather shocking. I cannot believe that you have never needed it. What do they give you? The strap? The birch?"

"No, neither." She wondered if she should be being so truthful or not. Bébé seemed to like it, anyway.

"Oh, really! I suppose your mother just puts you over her knee when you are *very* bad."

"Not even that, but—but I do get the switch sometimes."

The serving-girl appeared again with a bowl of sugar. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes showed signs of recent tears. She put down the sugar and stood quietly, waiting to be dismissed.

"Do you take sugar, Lavinia?" asked Bébé.

"No, thank you," said Lavinia.

Bébé giggled and turned to the slave-girl. "Did it hurt?" she asked conversationally.

"Yes, miss," replied the girl, surprised to be addressed.

"Good. Dismiss." The girl left. "Now, what are we going to do with

you? I could find a switch, I suppose, but I cannot be bothered, weally. I know! I have a splendid idea. Wait there."

Bébé elegantly uncrossed her legs and rose to her feet. She sauntered round behind the summer-house and returned in a minute or two, carrying what looked like a small bouquet or a large nosegay in her white-gloved hand. She sat down again, and Lavinia saw that what she was carrying was a little bundle of the fresh, pale-green heads of stinging nettles.

"Stand up," said Bébé. Lavinia stood. "Here." She indicated a spot just in front of the right arm of her chair. Lavinia stood where she was bid. "Legs slightly apart." Lavinia obeyed. Bébé smiled complacently. "This is not exactly six of the best, but it is quite effective."

She began gently to tickle the backs of Lavinia's knees with the nettles. At first it felt quite harmless, and then the sharp, hot, prickly stings began to come through. Bébé touched the insides of her knees and then moved her hand up, under Lavinia's skirts, gently brushing the insides of her legs. Slowly she worked upward until she came to the unprotected inner thigh, above the stocking-tops. Here, without ever losing her languorous delicacy, she concentrated the nettles more fiercely, stinging the unseen, delicate maiden-flesh, pressing the cruel leaves almost to her most secret places. Lavinia gasped in shock as the sharp irritant attacked her tenderness. Bébé smiled a cool, rather distant smile. It was to her a pleasure, but not an obviously sensual one. She flourished her bouquet along the fronts of the thighs as a finishing touch and then, withdrawing her hand, tossed it lightly over the side of the verandah.

"Sit down," she said. Lavinia's punishment was only beginning. It had not been at all as hard to bear as the switching. Rather more frightening than really painful, but now the stinging was beginning to develop. A beating begins to abate as soon as it is over, but the stinging was actually getting worse, particularly between her legs. Bébé had had an ingenious purpose in stinging her so concentratedly there, for, not only is it one of the tenderest parts of a girl's body, but such stings are assuaged by coolness and aggravated intensely by heat. Lavinia knew already that one must sit correctly; back straight, legs primly together, and her inner thighs, inflamed by the stinging, were already very warm. As they pressed together while she sat, the warmth and the stinging increased one another in a vicious cycle.

"Of course, that was nothing," said Bébé. "Just a little girl's punishment. Just something to amuse me. But perhaps it will teach you some manners. Do you think so?"

"Yes, Miss Bébé."

"Good. Now, how old are you weally?"

"Fourteen."

"I thought so. Why did you say fifteen?"

"I was confused, really I was."

"Were you weally?" Bébé's mood seemed to have changed and there was a note of sympathy in her voice.

"Yes, really."

"I thought you were delibewately pwetending to be older. Perhaps you wanted to be older than I."

"No, I want to be a *good* girl."

"Not tediously good, I hope."

"Just what I should be."

"There is not much diffewence in our ages, weally."

"Really? You seem—well, rather more sophisticated than I."

"Oh, *thank* you. Yes. I have stwong dwinks and all *sorts* of things. But we can be fwiends, perhaps."

"Yes, I would like that. I haven't any friends, you know. None at all."

"Oh, weally. How sad. Where do you come fwom?"

"From a sort of orphanage. It is not really the sort of orphanage where poor orphans go. More a sort of place where the better type of girl goes when she hasn't any one who really wants to take care of her. But it is a rather awful place where they make terrible noises instead of playing music, and they all sit round and watch the most appalling, monstrous things on a little square box, or else common, stupid things; and they all pretend to be common whether they are or not. It is like a sort of madhouse, really. But I escaped."

"How *exciting*. How did you escape?"

"Oh, the old knotted sheets trick. They are so keen on everything being new and original there that they do not even look out for the old knotted sheets trick. So I slipped away one night out of the window, but what do you think I found? I was in a dreadful land where *every one* was the same as the people in the orphan asylum. They all listened to the mad music and watched the square box and wore ridiculous clothes and had no minds and no imaginations and——oh, it was horrible.

"Then Miss Hazeldean just sort of found me wandering the streets and brought me here, and I don't know if she will keep me or what she will do. But that is why I was confused about my age and things—they confuse you about *everything* there; and that is why I am so undisciplined; and really I *do* want to be better."

What interested Lavinia about this narrative was that it was almost entirely true. The orphanage and the knotted sheets were, of course, rather liberal "translations" of the truth, and it was really she who had found



*She licked her lips with feline languor . . .
her nipples were more pronounced than ever beneath the blouse.*

Miss Hazeldean—at least, she supposed it was—but otherwise the story was exactly true. It had a curious effect upon her. Suddenly she saw everything from a new perspective. Everything made perfect sense. The last vestiges of her independent adulthood left her. Her sense of strangeness was only the strangeness of a child in a new place and among new people.

"It hurts," she said suddenly, referring to the stinging.

"Oh, it is nothing weally. Just a baby punishment. You've been spoiled. You need some pwoper discipline."

"*Can* we be friends?"

"Yes, I think so. I wather like you. I know.—I will show you something. Come with me."

They left the tea things and Bébé led Lavinia into the house by a side door. They went down a long passage and up a narrow winding stair. This part of the house was less bright and opulent than the front part that Lavinia had so far seen. It seemed older and less immaculately cared for, but not at all un-lived-in. The stairs seemed to wind up for at least four storeys, but Bébé stopped at the first and opened a tall black door. She turned to Lavinia.

"We should not weally do this," she said, and stepped into the room.

It was a Victorian school classroom, complete in every detail—iron-framed wooden double-desks made in one piece with the hinged seats behind them, white-painted walls, slightly peeling in places, a black-board on an easel at the far end and in front of it a high wooden schoolmistress's desk, overlooking everything. There was a smell of wood and chalk-dust, which had an aura of antiquity about it, but, though the things were old, the smells were new. This was not a museum-piece, frozen in time, but a real and living place.

"What do you think of it?" asked Bébé, her voice echoing strangely with that echo which belongs only to an empty classroom.

"It seems—overpoweringly real."

"It *is* weal. You should be here when there are weal lessons and a weal mistwess. In fact, you *will* be. Then you will see how weal it can be. Come here."

They walked to the front of the class. The board had been cleaned, but the ghosts of recent words and figures were still upon it and chalk-dust lay white upon the ground. On the mistress's desk lay a leather strap, some twenty inches long, shaped at one end into a grip, with a hole by which it might be hung and divided at the other end, for the last nine inches into two tails. It was stout, seasoned leather with the sheen of many years of use, and if not actually Victorian or Edwardian, had certainly been made before the last War. It was embossed with a plain

edging as well as the name of the maker and the letter "L", which stood for "light", though it certainly did not look light to Lavinia.

"Wather charming, isn't it?" said Bébé, picking up the strap. She smiled mischievously. "Can you imagine what I would get if the schoolmistress knew I had touched it?"

"I can imagine quite a lot of possibilities," said Lavinia.

"Yes, so can I. Would you like to see what it feels like?"

"Well, I don't really know——"

"Oh, come on. You want to be my fwriend, don't you?"

"Alright then."

"Hold out your hand."

Lavinia nervously put out her right hand.

"No, I have a better idea. Sit down at that desk." Lavinia sat down. Bébé closed her eyes for a moment and opened them again. "Who was that girl whispering?" she demanded in a girlish imitation of a schoolmistress. "Lavinia Delacourt, *again*. Stand up and come out to the fwont."

Lavinia came to the front of the class.

"Hold out your hand." She did so. Bébé drew back the strap and brought it down on Lavinia's palm with a crack that echoed and re-echoed through the tall, empty room. Lavinia's eyes were wide with shock as she clasped her stricken hand to her breast, covering it tightly with the other hand. It was several seconds before she had enough breath to speak. Bébé smiled, delighted with the intensity of the effect she had produced.

"Oh, Miss Bébé," said Lavinia at last, "that was *cruel*."

"Oh nonsense," said Bébé lightly. "That was not anything much. You could easily have six of those fwom some one much stwonger and more expewienced than I."

"I could not, Bébé. Really, I could not. I could not bear it. I should not be able to hold out my hand."

"Oh yes you would. You would have to. You will see."

The rest of the evening passed swiftly. Dinner was a feast of excellent food and wine and still better conversation, to which Lavinia contributed only a little, though quite creditably. There was for her a sense of being a child at an adult meal—a privileged, festive and rather heady feeling; and, indeed, this was the last grown-up dinner which she was to attend for a long time. Bébé, she now realised, was only a little older than herself, but Bébé was mature in other ways and occupied a privileged position; though how far that privilege extended was uncertain. Lavinia felt as sure as she could be of anything that her remarks about what might have happened to her if she had been caught playing with the school strap were quite genuine.

The room she had been given was a small attic chamber with a gable window ; comfortable and rather charming, but clearly not the best room in the house—more the sort of room one would give to a child. It was in the back part of the house, away from the main apartments and not far (though she was not yet familiar enough with the geography of the house to know it) from the school wing ; and she had been taken there by a maidservant with a chamber-candlestick, who had gone first into the room and lighted the candles on the mantelshelf and on the little chest of drawers *cum* dressing table. As she lay, staring into the darkness, a dozen different thoughts perplexed her brain. Was she going to be sent to that school ? And if so, when ? How would she be supported ? She had a few thousand that she could contribute to her keep, but what after that ? Would she have to work as a servant after all ? Even that would be better than having to go back. The stinging in her inner thighs still persisted, making sleep more difficult. She placed her cool hand in the tenderest place and pressed her flesh against it from both sides. It was now more an irritation than a real pain, but it would not go away. She thought, half-dreaming, of Bébé and heard her curious, intelligent-yet-babyish voice.

"Are you asleep ?" She saw a shadowy figure in the darkness : Bébé in a rather fetching pink dressing-robe.

"Hello."

"Hello. I just came to see if you had said your pwayers."

"I don't understand."

"Well, people often don't you know—down there ; and it would be such a bad start if you did not say them here on your vewy first night. Like taking a bit of the outside into your new life, do you see ?"

"Yes—I think so." It had indeed been some years since Lavinia had said her prayers. The two girls knelt at the side of the bed and Bébé said some prayers aloud and then they were silent for a short time, in which Lavinia thanked God for bringing her out to this haven. She hardly knew what sort of a haven it was yet, but she felt a new sense of trust and a kindling feeling of being in the hands of a higher Power. She was conscious, also, of the *tableau* of two little girls saying their prayers, and conscious that Bébé would be conscious of it ; and yet she understood also that affectation and sincerity are not necessarily incompatible. Most of the mannerisms, gestures and ways of speech of any one are, after all, affectation ; but they are the jaded, scarcely conscious affectation of a particular time and type of person. Even when people try to be natural and unaffected they only adopt certain mannerisms which they have learned to associate with natural and unaffected behaviour, probably copied unconsciously from a hundred television programmes. Bébé, in

her utter self-consciousness and premeditatedness of pose, was infinitely more *herself* than most people could conceive of being.

As Bébé tucked the sheets about her and placed a good-night kiss upon her forehead, Lavinia felt herself to have relaxed the muscles of her mind and body for the first time since she had been here—and, perhaps, for the first time fully for several years. Sleep, which had seemed before so elusive, came so swiftly and so softly that she was wholly unaware of its approach.

Chapter 5

Lavinia Goes to School

SHE AWOKE with the feeling—in no way troublous or disconcerting—that she was not alone in the room. In point of fact, she *was* alone, but it was clear that some one had been there not long ago, for the curtains, which had been closed at night, were now drawn wide, admitting a great square beam of joyous morning sunlight through the small gabled attic-window, and at the foot of the bed a set of clothes were neatly laid out for her. Not the clothes she had worn last night, but new clothes which she had never seen before. They were predominantly navy blue in colour, and she reached forward to take hold of the topmost garment of one of the neatly-folded piles. It was a pair of brand-new, but old-fashioned-looking, navy blue cotton school knickers with strong elastic at the legs and waistband and a soft white cotton gusset inside. In the waistband was sewn an inch and a half of white tape, embroidered in red with the name: “L. DELACOURT”.

She got up and examined the rest of the pile. As she had guessed, it was a school uniform: white blouse; navy gymslip; grey tie with thin navy diagonal stripe; white brassiere; white cotton suspender belt, much plainer and more no-nonsense than the one Mme. Gauvain had given her; white nylon full-slip whose half-inch of nylon lace was the sole concession to feminine fancy; black stockings, still fully-fashioned in that crisp, clinging, unstretchy nylon, and still sheer, but less ultra-sheer, more serviceable—more like those worn by the servants.

She began to dress, drawing the regulation blue-black knickers on under her nightie. The elastic squeezed her thighs firmly, giving a curious sense at once of security and of vulnerability. The thought of getting the cane, which had seemed rather remote and playful when Béb  had mentioned it yesterday, seemed all too plausible. One could readily imagine touching one’s toes while the much-feared, pliable instrument of scholastic discipline cut ferociously into the taut-stretched seat of this uniform-hued institutional garment. The very wearing of it took away something of one’s individuality and self-will—a feeling which increased as each fresh item of the uniform took its ordained place about her per-

son, every thread speaking the language of compulsoriness and lack of personal choice.

It may perhaps be deemed curious that the assumption of child's estate implied in the uniform did not also figure prominently in her feelings, whether as an humiliation or simply as a neutral fact; but the truth was that she was not, after all so very much older than a senior schoolgirl, and the pretence of independent adulthood, which was really no part of her inner nature, had already been freely relinquished on the previous day.

As she fastened her tie in the looking-glass over the chest of drawers, there was a brief knock on the door, and without waiting for reply, a maidservant entered, so exactly at the end of her dressing that Lavinia could almost imagine that she had been under observation, were it not for the fact that two-way mirrors and similar devices were the very antithesis of the spirit of a house such as this.

The maid brought a cup of tea, which Lavinia was respectfully enjoined to drink quickly. She was then conducted down the wooden attic stairs, along a very narrow passage, down two more flights of stairs which she had not seen before (or thought she had not), when she found herself facing the tall black school room door from an angle different to that from which she had seen it yesterday.

"Now you go though that door, miss," said the servant-girl.

Dressed as she was, Lavinia wondered how much or how little of a surprise the scene behind that door would have been to her if she had not secretly seen it in advance. Not that much of a surprise, she concluded, but she was glad, nevertheless, to have a little more exact knowledge of what lay before her. It was only a little, though, for the room alive and in use was a very different place from the empty, echoing chamber of yesterday's clandestine expedition.

A dozen or more girls were seated at desks, ardently writing in exercise books. Each of course, was uniformed identically to Lavinia. From behind, only their hair, varying in length, style and colour, gave any sense of differentiation. No doubt also they differed in size and shape, and perhaps in age, but as yet Lavinia could not tell. The only thing of which she was able to make certain—with a small pang of disappointment—was that Bébé's unmistakable dark head was not among those present.

At the front of the class, by the blackboard, stood the mistress. She wore a white blouse with lace collar, black skirt reaching below the knee and a long black chiffon scarf tied in a bow about her neck in the manner of an old-fashioned artist's floppy bow tie. Her hair was pulled back from her face, but, on the whole, she did not resemble the fearful-

ly strict governess of fiction, though clearly she would stand no nonsense. Lavinia, not knowing quite what to do, stood at attention inside the door. Her tunic fitted perfectly, and she supposed that it had been ordered from Mme. Gauvain's measurements. It too had her name sewn into the back. It was a little on the short side—an inch or two above the knee—increasing the sense of vulnerability and childishness.

The mistress did not give immediate attention to Lavinia, but continued with something she was writing on the board—a number of rather complicated-looking mathematical equations. These finished, she returned deliberately to her high desk, sat on her high seat from which she commanded an effortless view of the whole classroom, and looked up for the first time at the new girl.

"Name?" she demanded curtly.

"Lavinia Delacourt, madam," said Lavinia.

The schoolmistress opened her register and made a mark. Clearly the asking of the name had been merely a matter of form and clearly Lavinia was not expected to have arrived on time today.

"In this school it is the custom to address mistresses as 'miss', not 'madam'," said the mistress in a simple, matter-of-fact tone.

"Yes, miss. Thank you, miss."

"My name is Miss Carshalton. Repeat it after me."

"Miss Carshalton, miss."

"Good girl. Now, come here." Lavinia walked down the aisle to the head of the class, conscious of a dozen surreptitious eyes upon her. Miss Carshalton inspected her briefly, examining tie for straightness, hair and tunic for neatness, hands for cleanliness and a number of other small points which constituted an invisible check-list in Miss Carshalton's orderly mind.

"Good. Turn round," Miss Carshalton clicked her tongue. "Oh dear. Stocking seams not straight." Miss Carshalton knew that keeping stocking seams straight is a very difficult matter for one who has not had to do it before, particularly with the slippy, crinkly nylon, which does not adhere to the skin like the cheap barbarian counterfeit. Many girls, indeed, considered it *impossible* to keep such seams straight. However, they quickly learned otherwise, and Miss Carshalton believed that there was only one simple and effective way of teaching them. She took the wooden foot-ruler from her desk and applied it to the calves of Lavinia's legs, where the offending crooked seams lay, with a short series of sounding slaps. It was all Lavinia could do to keep the heels of her solid, sensible black school shoes planted firmly on the ground and not to wriggle under the sharp, searing shocks that assailed the flesh and muscle of her lower legs—but she did keep still, perfectly still, for she

remembered how much more merciless was the sting of that strap which now lay quiescent on the mistress's desk. She also managed, with all those eyes flickering upon her in whatever fractions of a second they dared to steal up from their work, to restrain any hint of a tear from dampening her eyes, though she could not prevent her face from flushing deeply.

The punishment over, Miss Carshalton was as briskly matter of fact and undemonstratively genial as ever. There was not the smallest hint of anger or impatience in her manner, nor even of satisfaction in having given so salutary a lesson. In some sense it was more startling to Lavinia than if she had been really cross with her—to realise that what to the new pupil had been a terrible test of endurance, which left her weak and trembling on the verge of tears of anguish, was to the mistress set over her, a routine and uninteresting task, no more noteworthy than cleaning the blackboard for a new set of equations.

Lavinia was shown her place and sat next to a pale, mousey-haired girl who was either too shy or too overawed by classroom discipline to do much more than glance at her out of the corner of her eye. Lavinia found that the skirt of her gymslip, which was not that short when standing upright, rode up a fair way at the back when one sat down, bringing part of the backs of one's thighs into contact with the cold, smooth wood of the bench-seat. This, somehow, made one feel more vulnerable and little than ever.

As the morning wore on, Lavinia began to form an impression of the life of the classroom which the ensuing weeks were to confirm:—that impression, which was, after being with Bébé and the grown-ups, only comprehended with a certain effort of mental adjustment, was of the overwhelming *ordinariness* of the school. Despite the fact that the whole thing might have been seen as an act of theatre (but then what in life is not an act of theatre?), there was no theatricality about it. Even the discipline, which Lavinia had suspected might be the passionate epicentre of the entire exercise, proved to be very matter-of-fact and humdrum.—At least, that was true of the classroom discipline. It did not seem to occur to Miss Carshalton even for a moment, that she was anything other than an ordinary schoolmistress teaching an ordinary class of girls. The whole thing may well have looked somewhat unusual from the outside; but, as Lavinia had already begun to discover, the thoughts, values, attitudes and point of view of 'the outside'—that is, of the world below—counted here for less than nothing.

The mistress quietly set her a number of fairly simple sums to test the level of her mathematical ability—which was quite low—while the other girls laboured at their equations. A series of stolen glances gave

Lavinia the increasing impression that the girl sitting next to her was not, like herself, an older 'child' but was really a girl of school age—perhaps fifteen or sixteen. This impression was later confirmed. In fact, about half the class consisted of school-age girls, the youngest being about fourteen and a half, while the other half were girls ranging (in outward age) from her own age to their late twenties or even a little older. She longed to ask them about this, but it seemed to be an unwritten rule of the school that the 'real' ages of the girls should never be in any way alluded to. Every one behaved, spoke and acted as if all of them were about the same age. Differences of age *were* discussed sometimes, but only in that, say, Lavinia, at fourteen, was one of the younger ones. A real sixteen-year-old, such as the one seated beside her, considered herself very much Lavinia's senior.

It was only much later that she learned that the 'grown-up' girls were mostly girls like herself who in one way or another had come from the outside world into the Empire and were going through a period of re-education in order to purge themselves of the accretions of the Pit and be re-made as young ladies of the Empire. The school-age girls, on the other hand, were the children of older Imperials who did not want their girls brought up in the midst of 'pop' culture and barbarian nastiness. Whether or not the school was officially recognised as a private seminary, Lavinia never knew. Certainly the Empire seemed to have friends in high places able to pull a few strings when necessary. One or two of the younger girls were not children of fully-fledged Imperials, but of rich parents who disliked the sort of education given by barbarian private schools and wished their girls to be brought up in a more traditional way. From these people, who were buying something which was now virtually unobtainable anywhere else in the world, it was thought that much of the money for the establishment derived. There was, for example, Leila, the daughter of a Middle-Eastern sheikh who wished her to have "a real English education—not the new kind, but a *real* English education."

There were in fact two classes in the school. This one, the Junior, was the largest and was, as its name suggested, the younger of the two. Imperial children below fourteen were educated elsewhere—in another country, it was said. The Senior class consisted of older school-age girls of seventeen and eighteen and even nineteen (the oldest of them were almost as old as Lavinia) and "grown-up" girls who took a more senior rôle. They wore a different uniform—grey rather than navy blue, with blouses, skirts and blazers rather than gymslips, sheer grey stockings and much-envied slightly-pointed grey leather shoes which looked much more stylish than the plain, standard black ones worn by the junior girls.

As Lavinia came quickly to understand, there is a curious magic about uniforms when coupled with the firm and constant enforcement of the rôles which they represent. Within a very short time she came to see any girl wearing the grey uniform as very much her senior, even though many of them were younger than she. This was true of every Junior girl. A girl of twenty-five would react to a grey-uniformed seventeen-year-old exactly as a child of fourteen would to a sixth-form girl; nor did any one see anything in the least odd or incongruous in the situation. What is normal is very much a question of what is accepted by those around one. Some one from any other age hearing the 'pop' music of the Pit, and seeing the appearance and comportment of its perpetrators, would think she had walked into a particularly unpleasant madhouse or into the rites of some Satanic cult; yet the inhabitants of the Pit treat the hideous cacophony as if it were quite normal and sane because others accept it as such. In the same way the unusual arrangement of seniority in the school was quickly accepted as natural and normal to the point where none of the girls could have imagined it any other way.

The Seniors were very conscious of their position and were encouraged to exert their authority over the Junior girls. If a Senior entered the Junior Common Room or some other place where Juniors were gathered, chatter would stop and all eyes would turn toward her. If she was merely passing through, she would probably ignore the attention of her inferiors. If she wanted an errand run or something done for her, she would select one or two of the girls and give them orders which they would rush to obey. If she was displeased by something—too much noise, perhaps, or untidiness—she would hand out punishments; lines most often, or copying out passages of poetry or French, but it was not unknown for a Senior to take a girl away for a caning. The Senior girls had absolute discretion in the punishments they gave, and, indeed, a certain arbitrariness, a certain sense that a Senior might punish lightly or severely or not at all according not only to the offence committed but also very much according to her own whim, added, and was intended to add, to their grandeur and sense of power. The mistress, of course, was scrupulously just, as befitted the full representative of authority; but the Seniors, being but minor deities, were allowed a little playfulness in their administration of the law.

We have said that the Juniors' gymslips were worn an inch or two above the knee. For this there were two reasons. In the first place it added to the sense of childlikeness and vulnerability induced by the uniform, and in the second place the short skirt was considered an excellent aid to training in deportment and orderliness of physical demeanour. If one walked, sat and disported oneself in a prim and correct fashion, legs

close together, posture erect, the garment could be worn with perfect propriety. If, on the other hand, one in any way sprawled, bent down in an ungainly fashion, crossed one's legs awkwardly and so forth, it was virtually impossible to avoid showing one's stocking-tops, and for such displays, both mistress and seniors were constantly vigilant, visiting them with sharp and salutary correction.

Lavinia was not a great offender in this regard, but occasionally, when tired or lazy, she could allow herself to relax in a way which, while perfectly normal for a modern girl was out of keeping with the standards expected of an Imperial young lady. On one notable occasion—an occasion which she was to remember for the rest of her life—she threw herself down into one of the old armchairs in the Junior Common room and lay back, low in the chair, her legs crossed in such a way that not only were her petticoat and her dark stocking-tops visible, but a considerable expanse of the back of her white thigh could be seen, even to the curve of her bottom and the navy shadow of school knickers peeping from its tight imprisonment between flesh and slip. No doubt it was but a momentary negligence, to be corrected almost immediately, but it was in that very moment that Amanda walked into the room. Amanda was a tall, immaculate, grey-clad Senior of whom the Juniors had cause to be wary. At times she would ignore them altogether, and overlook, or fail to notice, the silliest behaviour; in other moods she would pounce upon some unsuspecting girl like a hungry tigress. She was in such a mood today.

She entered the room and was immediately transfixed by Lavinia. She gazed languidly at the long, shapely, stockinged legs, exposed from neat school shoes and nylon-crinkled ankles to where the creamy curve of the thigh was cut off by the elasticated ridge of navy blue. Lavinia longed to correct her posture, but knew that it would only look like a belated attempt to conceal what had already been discovered, so she stayed quite still, submitting to the gaze of the Senior girl (chronologically a year and a half her junior, but subjectively her towering elder).

"Stand up, Lavinia," said Amanda quietly. Lavinia rose to her feet.

"Follow me."

Lavinia walked, a few paces behind Amanda down two or three passages to Amanda's room. It was a neat little room with bed, desk and dressing table. The curtains, bedspread and wallpaper were predominantly pink and the large sash window commanded a delightful view over the grounds toward a small spinney. Amanda turned the key, locking them in and put it in the small pocket of her skirt. The act seemed decidedly ominous and Lavinia felt her heart sink.

"So," said Amanda. "It seems that you have taken a fancy to making

a display of your rather charming young thighs. That is excellent. In a few moments I will ask you to be so kind as to favour me with a private viewing." She opened her wardrobe, and, reaching between the blouses and skirts, unhooked from the bar a crook-handled school cane. "When was the last time you were caned, Lavinia?" Somehow, the repetition of Béb  's earlier question caused a strange *frisson* to pass over Lavinia. She noticed that, like B    , Amanda had very dark hair—almost black and, in her case, styled into a severe, pointed, 1920s bob. Her face was porcelain-pale without the aid of powder and her lips so darkly contrasting and so finely-shaped that one wondered whether the slightest touch of lip-rouge had not been surreptitiously applied. Yet Amanda was in every point the sophisticated senior schoolgirl and in none the prematurely-knowing coquette; her pretty, sharp-pointed features breathed the air of classroom and tennis-court; her passions, intellectual and emotional, were schoolgirl passions.

"I have never been caned, Amanda," replied the Junior girl.

"Oh, good. I rather hoped you would say that. I know that Miss Carshalton does not cane her girls terribly often. I *do* enjoy giving a girl her very first caning. It is always such a shock." Amanda flexed the long, slender instrument of correction in her small, long-fingered hands, bending it into a full semicircle. Her little pointed tongue flickered across her lips as if she were anticipating some particularly delightful confection. "You see, it hurts so much more than you can imagine. Of course, some of the Seniors do not hurt the girls as much as others, but I am rather expert at this, and I am going to take great pleasure in hurting you dreadfully." She cut the cane through the air, making a harsh, unnerving swish. Lavinia's palms were growing damp and her forehead tingled as if the skin were being drawn tight across her brow.

Before commencing the punishment, Amanda made what seemed to Lavinia an extremely curious gesture. She had removed her blazer and was standing in her grey, small-pleated skirt and white blouse. Her white brassiere was just visible through the crisp, white linen of the blouse. Amanda raised the cane horizontally in front of her, and held it against the tips of her ample young bosom, pressing it firmly, so that it sank slightly into her mammary swelling. It gave Lavinia a strange sensation, as if, though she could not tell exactly what was happening, there was some powerful significance in this little ritual. The mystical mood was not wholly dissipated as Amanda positioned her over the small writing-desk and lifted her gymslip and petticoat in preparation for the chastisement. As she had suggested, Amanda took fully a minute or two admiring Lavinia's long, well-formed legs in their elegant nylon film, her pale thighs, swelling above the dark stocking-tops and her rounded

bottom whose contours were only half-concealed by the slightly loose-fitting, old-fashioned regulation knickers. She preferred to make girls touch their toes, which stretched them tighter and hurt more, but she knew that for a first caning, Lavinia would undoubtedly be in need of the solid support of the desk if she were to maintain her position, and she did not wish to detract from the dignity of the event by having her victim jump up in distress.

Amanda took her time. She knew that the delicious moments would be over all too soon, and had every intention of prolonging and savouring them to the full. She swished the cane fiercely through the air and watched Lavinia's muscles involuntarily clench themselves.

"How dare you move?" she demanded. "I have not even begun to cane you yet." She measured the cane, tapping it firmly against Lavinia's thighs, letting her feel its weight and suppleness; then she gave a sharp thwack which stung her and made her gasp, but was clearly not one of her real strokes. Amanda knew what she was thinking: "If that hurt so much, what will the real punishment be like." It was time to answer her question.

"Six of the best," announced Amanda in a clear, formal tone. She drew back the cane and brought it down squarely in the seat of Lavinia's knickers with all her young strength and skill beyond her years. Lavinia gripped the edge of the desk tightly. Despite its support, it was all she could do not to leap up. She wanted to beg Amanda not to give her any more. She felt she could not bear another stroke like that. Amanda smiled. She knew just how the girl was feeling, and enjoyed it immensely. She gave a few more sharp taps and then let go with the second stroke, in exactly the same place. She was a mistress at placing strokes and knew how to add to their effectiveness by "doubling" them. This time, Lavinia whimpered aloud. Amanda smiled and decided to place the next stroke a little lower. She selected a line at the very top of Lavinia's thighs, just below the protection of her knickers. The single layer of cotton was but scant defence against the pliable weight of the cane; nonetheless, Lavinia discovered that there was a noticeable increase in the first intensity of the sting when applied to the bare flesh. By now Lavinia was breathing in broken gasps; her back was pressing upward from the desk in involuntary resistance to the accumulating pain. Amanda laid the cane heavily across her shoulders—a serious blow which would be felt the next day—"Get down," she commanded. Lavinia flattened her breast against the wood in submission. Amanda flexed the cane again. Her tongue was flooded with sweet moisture, her teeth set firm with the enjoyable ferocity of her effort. She found her mark, tapped twice and gave another stinging cut to the thighs. For

the last two strokes she returned to the navy blue seat, doubling and trebling on the soreness that was already there. She administered them more swiftly, for she could no longer contain her youthful eagerness, but her feverish excitement made them harder than ever and the rapid cumulation of the two made Lavinia cry out in uncontrollable anguish.

Amanda was flushed, damp and trembling. She considered giving an extra stroke for the noise at the end, but she felt that the ritual of six should not be transgressed on so magic an occasion as a first caning. Plenty of time for extras later. She returned the cane to the wardrobe with a hand that she barely restrained from shaking and then returned to Lavinia, still prostrated and exposed over the desk.

"All over," said Amanda kindly. The gentleness of the voice was balm to Lavinia. A tiny fraction of her soul rebelled against such sweetness from one who had deliberately and wantonly inflicted such suffering upon her, but mostly she gratefully relaxed into the kindness offered.

Amanda lay a hand on her back, helping her to relax fully onto the desk. "All over," she said again. She felt Lavinia's heart beating furiously even as her breathing slowed and deepened. She ran a cooling hand over the ridged and swollen thighs and even slipped her long fingertips under the navy blue elastic to feel the burning flesh beneath. She took a last look at the long exposed legs and punished thighs and then folded the petticoat and skirt neatly into the position they should normally occupy on a respectable schoolgirl. Even so, the sight of the girl bent over her desk, unable to move until instructed to do so, perhaps, even now, afraid lest she should change her mind and give her further strokes, continued to fascinate her for a minute or so. Finally she ordered briskly: "Stand up," and Lavinia came smartly to attention, her face flushed and streaked with tears.

This was, in some way, a different Lavinia from the one who had entered the room. Her self-possession seemed gone and she treated Amanda with a real deference, as if she had been a mistress. Perhaps it was but a phenomenon of the moment, but Amanda felt moved to act upon it;—to place, as it were, a seal on it. She sat on the edge of her bed and beckoned Lavinia to kneel at her feet, taking the girl's head in her lap.

"There," she said. "You needed that, didn't you?"

"Yes, Amanda," said Lavinia. It seemed that there was no other reply she could make, and yet, at the same time, she felt it to be true.

"Now, would you like to write some lines for me?"

"Yes, Amanda." Again, it seemed a forced reply, and yet she actually felt that she *would* like to do some punitive task at this girl's bidding.

Amanda set her a hundred lines. They were not particularly long,

but their main peculiarity was that they made no mention of the offence Lavinia had committed. They were lines given not in punishment for that offence, but simply because Lavinia had agreed to them. When the lines were returned the next day, Amanda set another hundred, and from then on, Lavinia found herself coming to Amanda two or three times a week—sometimes more—to return and receive impositions of various kinds about which there was no pretence of their being a punishment for any particular offence. Sometimes Amanda made vague entries in the Punishment Book such as ‘unacceptable work’ or ‘unsatisfactory attitude’ but most of the impositions were not officially recorded at all and were strictly ‘illegal’, for the number of them would surely have drawn comment. One week Amanda decided to record every imposition she gave to Lavinia in the book, which resulted in a lengthy interview with Miss Carshalton on the subject of her declining behaviour, a three-and-a-half-hour Saturday detention and an extremely painful encounter with the school strap. This amused Amanda wonderfully, but for the most part she continued to keep about three quarters of her punishments ‘off the record’ and Lavinia began to gain something of a reputation as a ‘swot’ for the amount of time she spent working at her desk; for in truth, with prep and the ordinary impositions which came as part of school life (and Miss Carshalton, being not particularly fond of using the cane, was correspondingly free with lines) added to the regular impositions of Amanda, Lavinia found herself with very little free time. On one occasion when Amanda, for no particular reason, decided that it would be amusing for Lavinia to write two thousand lines, she was obliged to break the rules for several nights running, working nervously by the light of a single candle long after she should have been asleep and receiving extra punishments for inattention in class on the following days, which added greatly to Amanda’s enjoyment of the episode. “We *must* do it again some time,” she said.

Lavinia’s friendship with Amanda—for a friendship it truly was—was a curious one. As well as the unending doses of lines and copying, Amanda frequently set her poems to learn, and while she was severe about every mistake or faltering in their recitation, she also helped Lavinia to understand and appreciate them. Despite the fact that Amanda was chronologically her junior, it really was in every way like the friendship of a young girl for a Senior. Amanda had been educated in Imperial schools since the age of six and had known no other life. Consequently, her level of academic attainment was very high compared with that of children educated by the loose methods current in the Pit. Her soul and sensitivities had never been coarsened—even at second hand—by television or ‘pop’ culture, and she had a refined, delicate

perception of art and beauty and a sweet, romantic sensibility which is all but impossible to find in the Pit. In short, despite her tender years, she was, in all the things that mattered—in all the things which Lavinia needed to learn—very much her senior. Even her little cruelties were motivated by a subtle and rarefied connoisseurship—a sort of dark æstheticism—which Lavinia grew quickly to appreciate and sometimes to love: the more so in that she knew that she herself, in this friendship, was the object of a refined appreciation similar to that which Lady Chelverton had accorded her.

Under Amanda's tutelage, Lavinia's æsthetic soul began for the first time to blossom; and if, at times, she grew pale under the weight of monotonous labour imposed by her whimsical young mentor, it seemed like that ancient asceticism which, by mortifying the natural self, allows the higher spirit to soar. Amanda, in any case played Lavinia with a sensitive hand. At times she would leave her almost free from impositions for a week or even two. At other times she would weigh her down with dull, repetitive writing until she felt that it dominated her every breath and cried into her pillow at the seeming endlessness of the tasks so lightly imposed. Amanda acted merely according to her whim, but her spirit was so finely strung that her whim instinctively played upon Lavinia's unconscious needs and inner feelings like expert fingers upon a fine-tuned harp.

Whether any one in authority ever guessed anything of the connexion between the two girls was not certain; but the quiet unfolding, the increased sensitivity, the steady deepening of soul from the state of a coarse-grained Pit-tarnished girl to that of a romantic young lady was so much in tune with the purpose of the school that it is doubtful whether any intervention would have occurred even if the position had been known in its entirety.

Lavinia was caned on a number of occasions, though by no means often, for she was well-behaved, and Amanda knew that she was very sensitive to pain. It was, in any case, a part of Amanda's subtlety and refinement to deny herself the exquisite pleasure of caning her *protégée* except on the rarest occasions. She was caned by another Senior once or perhaps twice; by Miss Carshalton never, for that lady caned but rarely, and then with the large school cane and great severity. Lavinia had never merited such discipline, and knowing how unbearable she found the relatively small prefects' cane she hoped she never would. With Amanda, she graduated from the desk to bending over and holding her ankles—a particularly fetching pose, Amanda thought. She took between two and six strokes, with occasionally one or two extra for "fussing"—which she was completely unable to avoid, and therefore

the extra strokes were entirely dependent on Amanda's whim. The canings themselves were not dependent on whim. Amanda only caned for a reason—often untidiness in lines: a fact which added considerably to the hours spent by Lavinia on her impositions, for she was painstakingly careful to make them as neat as possible in order to avoid the rod.

Every time she caned Lavinia, Amanda performed the same curious little rite of pressing the cane to her bosom, and one day—as their friendship grew more intimate and Lavinia was accustomed to asking things of the Senior girl as of a mother or a preceptress—she found the courage to ask the meaning of this action. Amanda smiled. Such was the harmony of their union, such their intuitive oneness, that Lavinia asked the question exactly at that point in their friendship whereat Amanda felt that the time was ripe to introduce her *protégée* to this mystery which hitherto she had purposely left unexplained.

"It is," she said, slowly and deliberately—and although she introduced her words with no weighty preface, there was that between them which told Lavinia that she was about to be allowed to approach something hidden and sacred; something of no small import—"It is one of the oldest of the Feminine Mysteries. When a mother whips her child she does it not merely in order to beat the child into submission; no, a mother's punishment, correctly understood, is a form of spiritual nourishment. And so it is with any instructress who stands in place of the mother. Few people know this now, and the rule of mothers is breaking down, and with it breaks down every form of order. True punishment comes from the breast." The words seemed strangely serious and seemed to mean more than they outwardly said. It was not that Amanda was an unserious girl like many of the girls here who chattered mainly of pranks or of 1920s dance-bands. On the contrary, she often spoke of art and love, of the soul and the social order and the deeper things of life; but now she sounded less like an intelligent, sensitive schoolgirl and more like—well, perhaps like a red Indian wise-woman or something of that order. The moment passed and she returned to her normal self without further explanation, but the incident made a profound impression upon both of them.

Somehow the deep, inexplicable feelings aroused in Lavinia by the interchange seemed linked in her mind with that first caning which had begun her friendship with Amanda. They were powerful feelings which reminded her of the turbulent yet amorphous passions of her adolescence; and they craved some consummation or release—though what form it might take she had no real idea. Lavinia was not a perverse child, and certainly not the sort of girl who courted punishment as some of her classmates occasionally did; yet the idea grew upon her that she wished

desperately to re-live that first encounter with Amanda. She daydreamed about adopting some similar ungainly position when Amanda entered the common room, but, of course, she never quite knew when she was coming and the old circumstances never repeated themselves. On a few occasions she could perhaps have adopted an unladylike position *after* she came in, but she had not the nerve for that. Then one day her obsession took hold of her and led her to an act quite uncharacteristic. It was on a rare occasion when, instead of 'swotting' or reading quietly, she had joined the other Juniors in a dance around the wind-up gramophone. The record was a particularly 'hot' Charleston and one of the girls who knew the dance was teaching some of the others, while the rest tried out whatever steps they knew. It was a particularly riotous piece of entertainment and at the height of it—either by accident or design—Amanda entered the room. Of course all the girls stopped dead while the music continued—all except Lavinia, who, seized by a sudden perversity born of long dwelling on her idea, turned to face the Senior girl and executed a brilliant high kick, raising her leg almost to the level of her chin and exposing herself to the crotch of her knickers. She held the position for as long as possible, which, while it cannot have been more than a few seconds, seemed like ten minutes to every one in the room. Amanda stared at her coldly as she struggled to regain her balance and then said: "Lavinia Delacourt, report to my room after tea." She turned on her heel and left the room, leaving Lavinia with a sinking heart and a sincere desire to recall the last few minutes.

Amanda had not seemed to enter the mood; she had looked not interested but merely distasteful; she had not taken her off to her room in a re-enactment of their first encounter, but had coldly given her an appointment for a punishment, just as if she had been one of the other girls. Her action, she knew, had been vulgar and stupid and it made her feel hideously embarrassed. Again and again as the rest of the afternoon wore on, Lavinia wondered exactly what Amanda was thinking of her. Had she cheapened everything—destroyed everything? Her appointment also preyed upon her mind. How would it be? She had a dread that Amanda would just punish her as if she were one of the other girls and not her special *protégée*. Again, she wondered how cross Amanda was. What if she gave her a fearful thrashing; could she bear that? At moments she felt she could bear anything so long as their friendship could be as it was again; at others the idea seemed just too terrible to imagine.

At length the moment came, and she found herself standing outside Amanda's door. She had had fearful moments upon this spot before, for Amanda was a mistress in the art of building dread anticipation. She recalled the first time she was to hold her ankles for a caning. Amanda

had told her well in advance that she was no longer to be allowed the childish luxury of the desk and had dwelt at length on how and why the position increased the pain of the beating, on how difficult she would find it to maintain and the dire consequences of failing to do so. She had said this in a purely abstract way at the end of her previous caning, allowing her to digest the idea for some weeks and to be seized with dread the next time Amanda told her, a day in advance, that she was to be caned. As she raised her hand to knock on the door, she realised that she felt today even more nervous and leaden-hearted than she had on that day.

"Wait," commanded Amanda at the knock, and left the child for long minutes before she called "Enter." When she stepped into the room and closed the door quietly behind her, Amanda was sitting at the writing-desk, the friend and support of her early canings. She did not look up, but continued for some time with her work while Lavinia stood in silence. She noticed that the cane was in readiness at the end of the desk, making the scene look rather like a headmistress's study. Amanda had never done this before : she always kept the cane in her wardrobe.

After some little time, Amanda rose to her feet and turned her attention to Lavinia. She had seen Amanda so often before in this room that she was at once conscious that something about her was different. She was, of course wearing the same clothes, dictated to the last detail by the School's regulations—the grey skirt, the white blouse (she never wore her blazer for punishments). Suddenly Lavinia knew what it was. Amanda was not wearing a brassiere. Her contour was slightly different and her nipples, firmly erect, created hard little mounds in the crisp, white cotton, while the surrounding areolae were half-visible as terra-cotta shadows beneath the starched cloth, contrasting with the whiteness of her full young breasts.

As Amanda picked up the cane and flexed it, Lavinia felt at once excited and fearful. She felt sure now that the warmth had not gone out of their friendship—indeed, the unseen magnetism that flowed between the two girls seemed warmer now than ever—but at the same time she felt that this punishment would be different and more frightening than any that had gone before. Amanda pressed the cane to her bosom, resting the flexible rattan just below her nipples. She then slipped her thumbs above them and pinched her nipples hard against the slender instrument of discipline. She stood there for some moments, increasing the pressure of her thumbs to the point of causing herself not inconsiderable pain, and, at the same time feeling, as it were, the intensity of Lavinia's coming punishment, throbbing through her own being into the rod. She licked her lips with feline languor, slowly released the pres-

sure of her thumbs and lowered the cane to beneath the level of her hips. Her nipples were more pronounced than ever beneath the blouse. She stepped into the middle of the room.

"Over the desk," she said.

Lavinia, who had been affected by the last few minutes so deeply that she felt hot and giddy, was taken aback by this command. Not since their earliest days had the support of the desk been allowed to her, though, in truth, she was profoundly glad to have it now, for she felt already, before a single stroke had been laid upon her, that she could not easily stand for much longer. Perhaps, she thought, this really was in some way a re-enactment of their first encounter and Amanda's first words lent support to the idea.

"When I first disciplined you, Lavinia, I allowed you the support of my writing-desk because I considered that you would find it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain your position unsupported. I am allowing you the support of my writing-desk today for the same reason. You are about to enjoy eighteen strokes of the cane." The room turned a drunken figure eight and for a moment Lavinia felt that she might lose consciousness. The meaning of the words seemed to affect her sense of balance rather than her mind. She had rarely before had more than six strokes and never more than eight. Six was an ordeal she lay awake dreading (eight was six plus two extra). Three times six was almost inconceivable.

Amanda methodically lifted up the skirt and petticoat. One actually had a better view of the legs with the girl over the desk, for they stretched back at a slight angle rather than tending to tuck under the body. She fancied she could read fear and anticipation in every line of the nylon-filmed legs, from the rounded calves to the dimpled backs of the knees; from the broadening lower thighs to the beginnings of the stocking-top; from the dark upper welts where the suspenders were fastened to the naked, vulnerable, girlish upper thighs with the faint stripes of a previous caning still visible across their upper reaches and disappearing beneath the elasticated navy cotton. Eighteen strokes! What an enchanting prospect! What a world of suffering this girl would have passed through before she stood up again. She felt her breasts with the palms of her hands. Her nipples were hard, protruding and slightly sore. She felt her whole bosom aching to thrash this child: really thrash her. She felt the flooding moisture on her tongue that usually came after a stroke or two. She tapped firmly on the seat of the knickers and brought the first stroke home with a swish and crack. Lavinia moaned. She could never avoid making some sound after a few strokes, but this first one was actually harder than usual. The thought of so many to follow cast her into near-panic.

Usually Amanda caned very slowly, savouring each stroke and allowing its full effects, both physical and psychological, to sink in thoroughly. Today, with such a wealth of punishment before her, she proceeded more rapidly. She caned, certainly not hurriedly, but with a definite rhythm. Each stroke was well-placed, each stroke was hard ; but they came at intervals of no more than six seconds. The result of this was that while each stroke was denied the fullness of its individual effect, the *cumulative* effect of the caning as a whole was far more intense than any Lavinia had previously experienced. By the fifth stroke Lavinia was convulsed with uncontrollable sobs ; a thing which had never happened before. A fierce thwack across the shoulders kept her clinging close to the desk. Amanda slowed the pace very slightly and delivered another four strokes. She waited for a moment for the weeping to subside—it did not properly stop—and said : “ That is half your punishment over. You still have the same again to come.”

With the first stroke of the second half, Lavinia’s sobbing resumed as violently as before. It thrilled Amanda and spurred her on to beat the girl even more severely. She laid on the nine strokes rhythmically, fiercely, without a single pause. At the end, Lavinia lay crushed, sobbing, as if every spark of independent life had been beaten out of her. “ Not enough,” thought Amanda cruelly. She had never before really indulged herself to the full in caning Lavinia, but today she would.

“ What an appalling display of infantile snivelling,” she said aloud. “ Six more strokes.” She had expected to hear a suppressed groan or a sigh ; some tremor of the body ; something, at any rate, to indicate the girl’s revulsion or despair at yet further beating : but her body lay still in limp quietude. Fearful as she was of further pain, she had reached a point of passive acceptance and obedient inner resignation to the will of her young mistress. Amanda smiled and administered the first of the six with all her strength. Lavinia began to cry again, but it was no longer the uncontrollable, near-hysterical sobbing of a few minutes ago ; it was a sweet, maidenly, submissive weeping. She gave the six more slowly :—almost as slowly as her normal canings, but without the swishings and tappings with which she was wont to increase the tension of the punishment. This was a slow, silent, stinging punishment in which the sense of harmony between the two girls was profounder than it had ever been before. Lavinia’s gentle sobs were a song of submission and acceptance and Amanda’s relentless strokes of the cane were, despite their convulsive pain, like messages of love—or, perhaps more truly, like drops of milky nourishment from her virgin breasts.

“ Will you take three more for love ? ” asked Amanda gently when the six were over. “ You need not if you cannot bear it.”

"Three or six or whatever you wish, Amanda," said Lavinia quietly. Now it happened that six was exactly the number that had occurred to Amanda, but she had felt shy of suggesting so great a voluntary extension to the punishment. Six, however, was definitely the number her breasts dictated, and Lavinia's mention of the number seemed to confirm it. Thirty in all was, in any case, a much more satisfying number than twenty-seven.

"Six, then is what I wish, Lavinia, but only if you allow it."

"Yes." Lavinia squeezed out the word through a choking flood of tears. Amanda was half tempted to make the last six a little lighter, but she felt in her bosom that it would be wrong. She administered them a little more quickly than before, her whole body seeming to flow with the pliable sting of the cane. Lavinia gasped and sobbed rhythmically, her every breath exuding complete submission to the chastisement. When she finally rose to her feet, her legs again covered and burning beneath the heavy serge of her gymslip, their normal positions were reversed:—for normally after a caning, Lavinia felt calm, relaxed, grateful that it was over, while Amanda was taut, and trembling with pent-up passion and the containment of her full severity. Today Amanda felt warm, quiet and fulfilled, while Lavinia trembled with the intensity of her punishment and submission. In obedience to Amanda's direction, she wiped her tear-sodden face with her pocket handkerchief, having to borrow Amanda's to finish the job, and then, feeling herself unable to stand a moment longer, she flung herself into Amanda's arms. Amanda, who was taller and considerably stronger than she, supported her in a firm embrace. Their lips met in a warm, deep kiss. They had kissed before : chaste, girlish kisses, but this kiss, while still chaste, seemed like an intermingling of souls. Lavinia cupped her hand reverently about the outside of Amanda's breast. She felt the firm nipple against her palm and fancied a surge of nourishment flooding her being. She yearned to press her lips to the sweet, maiden mother-bud, but had not the courage to ask, nor, indeed, the will to take independent action of any sort. Instead she closed her eyes and let herself fall into the warm dream-world of the kiss.

Lavinia felt sure that after this her friendship with Amanda must enter some rich new vein, and that treasures yet stranger and more opulent than those which had been disclosed to her thus far must lie in store in the coming months. So, indeed, it might have been ; but, alas ! fate is often other than that which we have made sure in our hearts it must be. Within a few short weeks Amanda was no longer to be with her, Miss Carshalton was also to be gone and a new chapter would be opened in the life of Lavinia Delacourt.

Chapter 6

Sweet Sorrow

LAVINIA SAT UP, stretched her back and counted the lines she had now completed for Jill. Two hundred and thirty. Seventy more to go. It was nice to be so far through the task, but seventy long lines still seemed a lot.

She was a little out of practice in writing lines these days. In Amanda's day an imposition like this had been part of her daily fare, but Amanda had gone not long after *that* caning—the one she would remember as long as she lived.

It made her heart ache still to remember it. The caning had brought them so very close together—it seemed to have opened a door into a magic garden. After it, their friendship reached a new level of warmth and intimacy. Lavinia wrote more lines than ever for her young mentress and learned more poetry and spent more early-summer afternoons talking with her, learning from her, of poetry and philosophy, of art and beauty, and above all, learning those things which cannot be taught in words: those subtleties and refinements of sensibility which are so utterly unknown to the inhabitants of the later 20th century. Amanda was a rare spirit among rare spirits, and the delicacy of her soul was something at once exquisite and elusive. Only in those last two weeks after the caning did Lavinia truly begin to appreciate her; to see her for what she really was.

For two weeks were all she was to have; and only one of those unclouded by the knowledge of the blow that was to fall.

Lavinia sat propped against their favourite tree—hers and Amanda's—in the Summer afternoon sunshine. She had just finished her current imposition and was enjoying a few minutes of idleness as she awaited her meeting with her mistress. Amanda came into view, some three hundred yards away, looking more upright and prefectish in her immaculate grey uniform with every step she took toward her. Lavinia rose respectfully to her feet as she drew near.

"Sit down, kitten," said Amanda kindly—almost too kindly, like a nurse addressing a very ill patient. There was something, Lavinia felt, even at this stage, something almost ominous in it. "I have something to tell you."

Lavinia's heart lurched painfully inside her. What could it be, this 'something'? A severe punishment? No, Amanda never took this tone about punishments. She enjoyed giving them and never took much trouble to conceal the fact. No, this was something that was difficult for her to say; something she would prefer not to say; something dreadful. What could it be? Seeing the anguished suspense furrow the girl's young brow, she forged ahead to get it over with.

"Lavinia, I am going away."

"Away? For how long?"

"Perhaps only for the rest of this term, perhaps for ever. I cannot be sure."

"For the rest of the term!" The idea of Amanda's going away for ever had not even penetrated Lavinia's consciousness yet. For the rest of the term was enough. That was unendurable. "But why? How?"

"My mother is coming back. She has been away for a long time. I haven't seen her for two years. She wants me to be with her while she is in England. She isn't sure whether to keep me in school. She may take me back with her when she goes."

"But—your education!"

"I'm fairly well-educated by now, you know, and exams are not very important for an Imperial girl."

"Oh, but Amanda——"

"I want to finish my education here. After all you can only be a schoolgirl once." She smiled at Lavinia—"at least, I fancy *I* can. I'll do my best to get her to let me come back next term, don't you worry about that."

Next term! But that was not till Autumn!

"When are you going?"

Amanda had hoped not to be asked that question just yet. She took a breath. "The end of this week," she said.

"Oh but Amanda! We've hardly any time left together!"

It was a strange, sad, wonderful week; at once the happiest in Lavinia's life and the most painful. The impositions all but stopped and the two girls spent every spare moment together, talking, dreaming, building castles in the air. Miss Carshalton, knowing of the girls' deep friendship, made things easier for Lavinia, lightening her preparation tasks and avoiding giving her impositions that she might make the most of their last week. Nothing was ever said about this, but it was clear that Miss Carshalton was doing it, and Lavinia's heart went out to her.

The girls talked often of what they might do when they had both left school. Amanda always spoke as if there had been a world beyond the walls—a real world other than the barbarian nightmare of the late 20th

century. To her, it seemed there was a world of lovely hotels and real English villages and tea-shops and taxis—a world like that shown in the up-to-date films that the girls watched in the School Hall on Saturday evenings. Did she not *know*? Or did she prefer to dwell in a world of make-believe? Or did she know from her own experience that it was possible to live in a real, sane Imperial world, banishing the Pit to the ignored periphery of one's awareness? Or was it a curious, willed and conscious mixture of all three things? Lavinia was inclined to believe the latter.

Amanda seemed so wonderful—so kind, so sensitive, so very intelligent; for indeed, Amanda was stimulated by so many things—the new depth of her friendship with Lavinia; the realisation that her treatment of her had produced the most charming results in bringing to the surface a delicate, submissive, lovely little girl; and then the thought of seeing her mother again—much as she hated the thought of being parted from her kitten, she loved her mother dearly and was overjoyed at the prospect of seeing her once again and of spending long, blissful weeks in her company. She was aware that there was so much more sweetness in the bitter-sweet compound of this last week for her than there was for Lavinia, and this awareness made her kinder and more tender than she had ever seemed before.

The week sped by all too quickly, and the more the girls strove to fill each unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of burning adolescent life, the more rapidly those minutes seemed to melt away.

Too soon, oh far too soon, the day came, the hour came, and the long black car with gleaming chromium and wide running-boards drove up the gravel path; the engine stopped; the door opened and Amanda's mother was there. Oh, the desolation when Amanda let go of Lavinia's hand to scamper, unperfect-like, a dozen steps and enclose in her arms her dear flesh and blood.

Then, resuming her sixth-form dignity, she conducted her mother to where Lavinia was forlornly standing.

"Mummie, I want you to meet my friend Lavinia Delacourt."

'My friend'—what a strange phrase. She would never have presumed to call herself Amanda's 'friend'. Something between *protégée* and slave had been her own assessment of her standing with Amanda. The word affected her in a way that was oddly ambiguous. On the one hand it might seem to reduce their curious, exquisite relationship to the level of common 'friendship', which may mean anything or nothing. On the other hand it set a seal upon them. Amanda had accepted her as a friend, and she felt sure that Amanda did not accept friends lightly.

But she must turn her attention to the lady to whom she was being introduced. What a *consummate* Mummie. No wonder Amanda loved

her so. What a *chic*, upright, Imperial Mummie. How different from the casual, cathode-rotted creatures who had the bad taste to bear children in the Pit. Lavinia took the outstretched hand, a firm hand encased in the thinnest, softest black leather driving glove, that left one's moist, adolescent hand smelling of fine leather and good scent and grown-up femininity.

"How do you do, Lavinia."

Lavinia wanted to hate Amanda's mother. She wanted to resent and abominate this alien who was swooping down to snatch her darling away, perhaps forever. She had made up her mind to do so, but in an instant her resolve evaporated and she was won over to loving her. Love at first sight, one might say—not, of course, the sort of love usually intended by that expression, but one of the many and various *nuances* of love that blossom so freely in the Empire.

They took tea *à trois* in the summer-house, served by a pretty maid-servant and the demure, silent slave-girl. Lavinia hardly took her eyes off Amanda's mother throughout the meal. Her fox-fur, her carefully-painted lips, the elegant way she handled her tea-cup—everything about her seemed so exactly what a mother should be; a refined, sophisticated, kind, grown-up mother. She took Lavinia exactly at the valuation implied by her blue junior uniform (had she been at the school herself?).

"Friendship between an older and a younger girl can be a charming thing," she said. "I am very pleased that Amanda has the good sense not to despise children younger than herself as 'infants'."

"May Lavinia stay with us during the Summer holidays?" asked Amanda, encouraged by this note of approval. "She is an orphan, you know."

Oh, yes, she *was* an orphan. Never had she felt that fact more keenly than now.

"I am not sure where we shall be during the summer, but certainly Lavinia may visit us at some point."

The Summer-house was out of bounds to unaccompanied school-girls, but it was a place of treats with relatives and other special occasions in a world where tea-shops and public places were few and far between. Each member of the party had some memory of the Summer-house. Even Lavinia had the story of her visit there with Bébé, though she edited out the most striking part (would it have been appreciated? She fancied it might, but dared not risk it). She watched the silent slave-girl. What made a girl into a slave? Did they like it? Did they choose it? Were they slave-girls for always or only for a time? It could not be really unkind, she now felt sure, for Amanda's mother could never sit so complacently in the presence of unkindness.

The Summer tea-time drifted past, and with it the last full hour with Amanda. Now the time remaining must be measured in minutes. The two girls had a quarter of an hour together in Amanda's bedroom while her mother talked to the senior mistress. They exchanged little presents and shed tears—yes, Amanda herself shed tears : silently, stoically, but real tears nonetheless. Then Amanda set Lavinia a hundred lines.

"A hundred!" exclaimed Lavinia. "No! Set me a thousand. Ten thousand! I will do nothing but write your lines until you return."

"How dare you question me? Is your last act in my presence to be one of disobedience?"

"I am sorry, Amanda."

"You will be. Fetch the cane."

Lavinia had never touched the cane with her hands before. She opened the wardrobe, now empty of everything except the cane which waited for the new prefect who would be appointed in Amanda's place. She unhooked it reverently from the bar, fascinated by its cool, hard surface and its supple weight. She gave it to Amanda, who had removed her blazer. Amanda flexed it in her hands. She had not caned her kitten since that memorable day. It was charming to have occasion to do it once more.

"Bend over, Lavinia." Lavinia bent double, touching her toes (she practised this every morning and evening on Amanda's orders so as to be supple enough to bend gracefully and hold her position). Amanda raised her skirt and tapped the upper thighs. "Six or a dozen, Lavinia, the choice is yours."

"A dozen, please, Amanda."

Amanda smiled and laid the first stroke across the seat of the navy knickers with all her force. Lavinia yelped aloud. She had almost forgotten how much it could hurt. She began regret having so rashly asked for a dozen. After all, it was only on that one occasion that she had ever endured more than eight, and she had never taken so many in this unsupported position. But it was too late now. The strokes fell rapidly and with dreadful force. It was by no means a hurried caning, but there was not time for a leisurely one, and it proceeded with a brisk, forceful rhythm. The aggregated pain of the accumulating strokes built up to an almost unbearable burning crescendo. Lavinia was reduced to tears before the sixth stroke and by the ninth was in real distress. The last three strokes were delivered a little more slowly to give her a chance to recover herself, but harder than ever. Amanda smiled, running her cool hands over the burning thighs and knickers. It had been a very satisfying punishment.

"Now stand facing the wall while I change." Lavinia obeyed, listening to the sounds of Amanda taking off her school uniform item by item

and putting on the 'outside' clothes which were laid out on her bed. She found herself thinking of her mistress's youthful breasts, the source of her nourishing discipline. And, as strange, irrelevant thoughts will drift through one's head at such moments, she remembered that she had often wondered whether the senior girls' knickers were white or grey, and the thought occurred to her that if Amanda was changing completely she might be able to satisfy her curiosity by looking at her discarded clothes.

"Ready," said Amanda.

Lavinia turned her flushed, tear-streaked face from the wall and looked at the "new" Amanda. She had never seen her mistress out of uniform before. She looked at once so different and so much the same: so *chic* and elegant, so much more grown-up, and yet at the same time, somehow stripped of her special dignity as a prefect and 'civilianised'. She was at the same time more and less awe-inspiring.

"One hundred lines," she said, as if she had not changed at all. "Send them to this address, and hurry because I do not know how long I shall be there. I want them to be extremely neat, and if they are not satisfactory, or if I do not receive them in time, I shall write reporting you to May." May was a large, hearty senior not much given to punishing juniors, but dreaded because the few punishments she did give were the hefty strappings of a vigorous young sportswoman who hardly realised her own strength. She used a heavy packing-case strap which left girls unsteady on their feet, and sore for days afterwards.

"Thank you, Amanda. Will there be anything else?"

Amanda smiled at the servant-like turn of phrase. "Yes, there will. I want you to throw yourself into the life of the school. Don't go moony on me. You have a wonderful opportunity here. Something most barbarian orphans never find—never even have the sense to look for. You have been doing well and improving in all directions, but you're a long way from perfect yet. Work hard. Play hard. I want to see you a much better Imperial when we meet again—and with luck that will only be a month or so, remember. Will you do that for me?"

Lavinia nodded wordlessly, unable to speak without undamming the flood of tears within her.

"Good girl. Now, help me with some of these cases, will you?"

Final good-byes. The doors of the great black car bang shut. The engine starts and the wheels crunch the gravel. At the last sight of Amanda she is waving out of the window. Then, the great gatepost of the high outer wall interposes itself between them and Amanda turns to her beloved mother, while Lavinia turns back to the house feeling more lonely and desolate than she can ever remember.

School without Amanda felt strange and alien, for in truth Lavinia had never really become a part of it. She had passed from being an awkward new girl to being Lavinia's *protégée*, perpetually occupied with impositions and other work, without ever having really 'settled in' as an ordinary schoolgirl. She was generally considered to be quiet and something of a 'swot', the sort of girl who is passed over by her contemporaries and lives a life of partial isolation amid the bustle of school life. But Lavinia was really not that sort of child at all. She was a passionate, gregarious girl who had lived a life of isolation in the Pit because there was no other life for a soul radically out of sympathy with the barbarian mentality to live. With Amanda gone she felt the return of her old isolation with the heart-weary pang of one who feels once again the onset of some old and painful disease of which she thought she had been cured.

She recalled Amanda's words of encouragement and her admonition to make the most of school life, which half an hour ago had rung so false and hollow in her ears, and already she began to see the sense of it. Of course, nothing could replace Amanda; of course she could not be truly happy until she returned—oh, *if* she returned—but she would *not* pine for her; she would not return to her old state of lonely misery here in the midst of the Empire. Such a thing would be absurd—escaping from one prison to cast herself voluntarily into another of her own making.

And so, with heavy heart but resolute spirit she attempted that very tea-time to throw herself into the flow of school life. Her animated, rather forced attempts at conversation were by no means repulsed. The girls here were friendly and kind for the most part, and not ill-disposed toward her. They had, however, categorised her firmly in their minds as a particular sort of girl, and her sudden change of character, with its rather unconvincing *bonhomie* was a little difficult to respond to. Lavinia was left with a sensation not of having been snubbed, but of having somehow behaved with great *gaucherie* and having been tolerated wonderfully.

Actually, she had not progressed too badly. She had been well enough received, all things considered; she had brought herself to the attention of her classmates, had prepared the ground for the new *miroir* she was to present to them (a thing which could not, after all, have become accepted immediately) and had made a middling-to-good impression. Had she attempted a less fulsome display of good spirits while her heart was leaden within her, she might have succeeded better yet, but nothing really had been lost. This was an objective summation of the position of affairs. In her own mind, however, she had been a dismal failure.

She had made a hideously embarrassing display of herself and her classmates, while being as kind as possible, had obviously not known where to look. She went to bed depressed and utterly hopeless. Amanda had gone and her attempt to be anything without her was a horrible mockery. She retired thankfully to the semi-privacy of her curtained-off bed in the dormitory and began to cry as quietly as she could manage. In truth, it was mostly the reaction to Amanda's departure which made everything seem so bleak. In a day or two she would regain her equilibrium. Her emotions were very much those of a child of thirteen or fourteen—partly because having had no real life in the Pit she had had no chance to mature and partly because living and being treated as a child has the effect on a sensitive and intelligent girl of modifying her sensibility toward the rôle she is playing—indeed, the very words 'rôle' and 'playing' are used only in concession to the barbarian way of looking at things, for in truth it was not a rôle any more than being an advertising executive or a television producer or a street-corner lout is a rôle. In other words every sort of person 'plays up' to certain expectations which go with her mode of life, and about these constructs her 'self', which is an amalgam of many things, internal and external, inborn and adoptive. Lavinia, then, had the emotions of an adolescent in a world without television: emotions which had a purity and intensity which no barbarian of any age can conceive of; and at present those emotions were tormenting her.

She had cried often enough in this curtained half-sanctuary from the all-too-public life of the school. She had cried when Amanda had overburdened her with arbitrary impositions, or when she had left her a day or two without attention, but the bitter, racking sobs which now surged through her chest were of quite another order, and despite her best efforts, much less difficult to keep quiet.

After some minutes the thing she dreaded took place. Some one had heard her and come to investigate. That some one was, fortunately, not a prefect nor (a fact by which she was half-relieved and half-disappointed) one of the nicer of her classmates whom she liked or admired. It was Ella from the bed next to hers. Ella was one of the few unpopular girls in the school. She was sullenly rebellious against authority, a slacker (which was worse than a swot) and was even suspected of petty pilfering. She had a generally cynical turn of mind which reminded one rather unpleasantly of the untrusting and untrustworthy world below. However, she seemed friendly enough toward Lavinia.

"I say, are you all right?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, nothing the matter," said Lavinia, struggling to control her sobs.

"You don't look all right. You mustn't let those beasts get at you, you know."

"Which beasts?"

"The other girls, of course. Most of them are awful."

"Are they?"

"You've kept well clear of them for the most part, haven't you?"

"I suppose I have, but——"

"But what?"

"I don't know. They seem nice enough to me."

"Ignorance is bliss."

"Then it's folly to be wise."

"We're both different, you and I," said Ella suddenly. "we aren't like the others. We know what's what around here, don't we?"

"Yes," said Lavinia. It was a weak and foolish reply. She had no real idea what Ella meant by 'knowing what was what', but she knew from her tone that it was nothing very pleasant or honourable; nothing that Amanda would have regarded with anything but scorn. Lavinia meant nothing, really, by her assent. She was simply too tired and too numb to argue or even to enquire. The vague flattery of her inclusion among those who 'know' was mildly comforting—like warm, weak tea.

"You stick by me and I'll make life a lot easier for you here." Ella was talking as if the place had been some kind of prison; talking with the low-souled animal cunning of a child from the dreadful slums of the 19th century or the well-heeled, but more deeply impoverished, suburbs of the latter 20th. Yet for her there could be no excuse. Neither her body nor her soul had been starved. Her heart had not been poisoned. Her bad will was entirely her own. What a distasteful girl she was. Still, perhaps she could not help her nature, and her manner seemed well-disposed toward Lavinia. Poor, wounded Lavinia was ready to accept any sort of kindness at that moment and loath to rebuff a fellow creature.

"Thank you," she said limply.

The silence bell rang and their conversation was cut short, somewhat to Lavinia's relief.

Over the next few days, Lavinia gradually began to re-find her feet in the school. She was clever, pretty and amusing, and the other girls were quite pleased to discover that she was now 'disengaged' and available as a companion in a more normal way than heretofore. Her heart still ached, but she remembered Amanda's parting injunction, her own resolution not to pine and her good fortune in being where she was. Amanda would probably be back next term and until then there was so much to live for—lessons, games, music, companionship: the whole innocent, sunlit life of an un-poisoned world—the birthright of every girl,

which so very few girls below these walls would ever be allowed to know.

And as girls will, she found herself gravitating towards one friend in particular.

Susan.

Susan was a quiet, bookish girl, gentle and rather shy, who had been somewhat overlooked by the other girls. She was on the fringes of one of the nicer sets, and freely included in everything they did, but she had no 'special friend' of her own and was regarded on the whole as "a decent sort but just a *touch* on the dull side". Lavinia, with her sensibility newly refined by Amanda—a refinement, which seemed heightened rather than otherwise by the pain of Amanda's absence—saw in Susan a depth of soul which answered to her own. They were very different in character, but Lavinia admired the purity and in-turned grace of Susan's manner; her wonderful, pigtailed seriousness. They struck up an earnest, intense little friendship. Lavinia found herself imitating Susan—taking her work very intently, worrying over her class marks, treating a reprimand as a minor tragedy. The imitation was quite conscious. She wanted to enter Susan's world; to experience its cool, quiet confinement.

To the other girls it seemed that Lavinia had changed very little. She continued to be a 'swot'—quiet, studious, a little dull: not unlike Susan herself. The friendship seemed natural enough. If there was one curious change it was that Lavinia's academic results went from being moderate to very good.

The truth was very different. If Lavinia herself had not changed, her life had changed enormously. She had passed from the boiling seas of Amandine passion into the cool, shadow-flecked shallows of Susan. Susan was, for her, a place of convalescence, a delightful tranquillity in which her injured heart might learn to heal itself.

And Susan *was* delightful. How few people ever get to know a girl like Susan. Even when they are her sisters, or when they marry her, how rarely do they walk among the gently echoing cloisters of her sequestered soul. Three times, perhaps, or four, in the course of a half-lifetime in her presence do they say: "How extraordinary of her to say that. There really is more than meets the eye to Susan." And then it is forgotten again, because she is only Susan after all. Lavinia wanted to walk in that cloister; to capture the golden moment of Susan's perfect adolescence. And Susan did not disappoint her.

They sat together on a honey-radiant afternoon, as the Summer was growing from spring-like youth to her full stature, watching the little flies above the waters of the stream that flowed through the grounds. Lavinia had fallen silent as she was often wont to do.

"Do you love her very much?" asked Susan.

"Love whom?" asked Lavinia disingenuously.

"Why, Amanda, of course."

How sweet of her to know. How delicate of her to have waited these weeks before showing that she knew. How immaculate of her to judge the moment so rightly.

"Yes," said Lavinia. That was all she said. It was all she *could* say. Her lip trembled and a helpless tear rolled down her cheek. The first tear since the day the car had rolled away down the gravel path. She had been good for Amanda. She had been very brave.

Susan took Lavinia in her arms and lay back, pulling the weeping girl with her, until they lay together, Lavinia's head upon Susan's breast. Sensible as always, she had a handkerchief ready, and she stroked Lavinia's hair softly as she wept.

Susan watched the white clouds pass overhead, heard the birds chattering and the stream rushing over the little weir. She felt her friend's sorrow as she cradled her dear bobbed head, and yet she felt at the same time one with everything. Her sympathy was deep and true, and yet there was in it a sort of exhilaration, for she felt that in Lavinia's love she was cradling something rare and precious—as beautiful as the cloud-mantled sky, as bright as the rushing waters of the stream, as firm as the rocks over which they rushed.

"I am sorry," said Lavinia at last, sitting up awkwardly and looking for her own dry handkerchief. "You must think me an awful fool."

"I cannot imagine anything further from what I think you."

"You are a dear friend."

"I hope I can be as dear to you as you are to me."

"Thank you."

"Why don't you lie down again? Just watch the clouds with me."

"That would be nice."

"You know, I have always liked you; ever since you came here."

"Really? But you hardly knew me."

"No, but I watched you. I watched you and Amanda. Do you mind? I wanted to write a poem about you—both of you. I should still like to write it, but I won't if you don't want me to."

"I didn't know you wrote poetry."

"No one knows. I have never shown any one. Not even Mummie."

"I should like to see something of yours."

"I should be too embarrassed. It is very emotional."

"Well, you have seen how emotional I am."

"As soon as Amanda left I determined to see if I could comfort you; be your friend. I am not much of a friend, I know, but I do understand,

you see. I knew I could help you. I have helped, haven't I, in my funny little way?"

It was a curious feeling. To this moment, Lavinia had believed that she had picked Susan out. Now it seemed that Susan believed that she had chosen Lavinia, and Lavinia knew that Susan was right. It was humbling, and rather delightful. What a neatly-wrapped box of delights this Susan was.

"I have never thought of Amanda and me as *friends* exactly. She is something more than that—and I am something less. But of friends, Susan, you are the best I have ever had."

Susan could not bear the embarrassment of praise, and in fleeing from it, plunged headlong into that other subject she had longed to raise but had despaired of ever finding the courage. "Did she beat you?"

"You mean Amanda? Yes, sometimes."

"What was it like?"

"She caned me. It hurt."

"Dreadfully?"

"Dreadfully. I am very sensitive to pain."

"So am I. I don't think I could bear it."

"One does."

"Did she give you lines?"

"All the time."

"Hour on hour, day on day, week on week."

"Yes."

"Isn't she wonderful?"

"Yes."

"I think about those things, you know. I lie awake at night and think about them. I don't think I could do them, though. Not give myself up to them the way you do. I am too—too ordinary."

"I don't think you are ordinary, Susan."

"Don't be polite to me: we are too much friends for that."

"I'm not being polite. You are not ordinary. You have a deep, lovely soul."

The tea-bell rang and they cantered across the grass together, blue-uniformed, hand in hand.

Chapter 7

The Reign of the Young Dragon

THEY WERE always hand in hand after that. It annoyed a few of the girls. It annoyed Ella in particular, who felt she had staked something of a claim on Lavinia. She could not understand, or really believe, Lavinia's friendship for Susan. She knew that Lavinia was sharper and cleverer than most of the girls and had made up her mind, quite wrongly, that she had something in common with herself. Susan to her was a dull, wet thing whom Lavinia must be cultivating for some dark purpose of her own. A girl with Lavinia's spark could not actually *like* Susan. She too was aware of some details of the friendship with Amanda, but had interpreted it in her own coarse-grained way.

From time to time she managed to corner Lavinia and talk to her of clever schemes for breaking bounds without being caught, or ways of obtaining cigarettes ; or else to complain bitterly of the school discipline, which, in all conscience, was mild enough most of the time. Lavinia listened rather feebly. Her essentially passive nature made it hard for her to resist and reject the girl outright. Her quick sympathy made excuses for her. "She cannot be at all happy here with attitudes like that. I can't just snub her. But really, she is *so* awful."

Once, after Ella had made a rather nasty comment about Miss Carshalton, Lavinia decided to break relations once and for all.

"Ella," she said deliberately, "you are a disgrace to the uniform."

Almost at once Lavinia felt remorse. But there. It had to be said some time. That was the truth about Ella and she might as well know it.

Ella's response nonplussed Lavinia completely. It was a hyæna-like howl of laughter.

"'A disgrace to the uniform'," she gasped during a pause in her hooting. "Lavvie, you are so funny. What a wonderful thing to say! You know some of the girls here could almost say that seriously."

"But I *do* mean it seriously," said Lavinia.

"No, don't. I can't bear any more. My sides are actually splitting," and off she went, shrieking down the corridor like a demented owl. Her laugh was as awful as her attitude to life. No doubt they grew from a common seed.

Then Miss Carshalton left. Lavinia and Susan were both distraught. The young mistress had been so kind and wonderful. She was strict, of course, but perhaps not strict enough. Nobody really feared her the way they were to fear her successor.

She was going to teach in another place—another part of the Empire. Oh, the lucky girls there! They had better appreciate her the way we did! Come back if you are unhappy, Miss Carshalton. Come back to us. We will always welcome you here.

"Dear, silly children! Of course I shall come back. I shall visit often, and probably teach you now and again."

Oh, but what shall we do without you?

"You will have a new mistress, of course, and you will be as fond of her, with your dear, kind hearts as you have been of me."

Miss Carshalton left in the afternoon, and the next morning, when they came into class, Miss Wellard was there. She was rather younger than Miss Carshalton, and rather taller. Her dress was immaculate—perhaps even a shade too *chic* for a schoolmistress. She carried herself with the air of one who has a great consciousness of herself and of her standing.

From the moment the girls entered the room—before Miss Wellard had spoken a single word—it was somehow clear that she had taken possession. The classroom was *her* classroom now. Not Miss Carshalton's, and not the girls'. Its atmosphere had changed radically. It was a different place altogether. She had made one or two physical changes. The long, colourful 1930s wall display entitled *The Pageant of History* had been taken down and in its place hung a very dry-looking map of the world, excessively detailed and with long columns of facts and statistics—lengths of rivers, heights of mountains, principal exports and so forth—tabulated in tiny print in the deep side and bottom margins. Julia's lovely decorated calligraphic text of *Mariana in the Moated Grange* had also been removed, and worst of all, Squiggles was gone. Squiggles was the class mascot—a dear, worn, 1950s toy rabbit. Squiggles always sat on the high window-ledge, looking down over the class with her wise, quizzical eye. She had been there longer than any one here could remember. She was not an obtrusive rabbit. She was so high up and so tucked into the corner that most newcomers did not notice her until she was pointed out. Miss Wellard had spotted her immediately and taken it upon herself, in defiance of all class tradition, to remove her.

There seemed something ominous in these changes. Something ominous, too, in the very air that hung about Miss Wellard. A class knows when it is in the presence of a disciplinarian before she ever speaks a

word. One tries, in one's mind, to argue away the hard evidence of one's infallible sixth sense.

She is very elegant. She cannot possibly be a hatchet-faced martinet.

Of course, they all seem strict at first. Even Miss Carshalton frightened me on the first day.

"Good morning girls." *She speaks. Now we shall know what she is like.* "I am your new class mistress. My name is Miss Wellard. I am sure it is unnecessary for me to say that I expect from every one of you hard work and absolute, instant obedience. Tender those two things and you will pass a pleasant time in my class. Fail to do so and you will suffer."

She smiled amiably and adjusted her permanent-waved hair with her hand in an unexpectedly feminine manner, before reiterating, without undue emphasis, and much as if she had been repeating some fact or date which she wished the class to remember.

"You will suffer."

Something in the very matter-of-factness of the warning made it more chilling than if she had shouted at them.

But, of course, they always like to make an impression in the beginning. Make sure they get the class under control. It doesn't mean anything much.

"I want a monitor to hand round these textbooks. You. What is your name?"

"Leila, miss."

"Leila, you will be my book monitor."

Janice drew in her breath just audibly. The whole class knew what it meant. Janice, as the youngest member of the class, had the privilege of handing round the books. Miss Wellard should have *asked* who the book monitor was. It wasn't *fair*.

"You. Stand up."

Janice rose to her feet, flushed and trembling.

"Name?"

"Janice, miss."

"Is something troubling you, Janice?"

"Please, miss, I am the book monitor."

"No, Janice. You *were* the book monitor. I shall appoint my own monitors. Sit down."

Janice sat down, pink with embarrassment and repressed tears.

"She is a beast!" said fiery Julia at lunch time. "Fancy treating Janice like that."

"What has she done with Squiggles?"

"Yes, Squiggles has always been there."

"Squiggles is *ours*. She can't just kidnap her."

"And taking Julia's calligraphy away."

"Yes, but did you notice something else she has taken away?"

"What?"

"The strap."

Sally was right. The strap that had always lain on the mistress's desk was no longer there.

"What does it mean? Perhaps she doesn't believe in punishment."

"Perhaps she only gives lines."

"Perhaps her bark is worse than her bite."

"I think it's *sinister*."

"Oh, rot. Who is going to ask her about Squiggles?"

"No thanks, she frightens me."

"Me too."

"I will ask her," said Susan.

Every one was taken aback by this sudden access of courage on the part of the timid Susan, but no one volunteered to take her place.

At the beginning of afternoon lessons, Susan raised her hand.

"Name?"

"Susan, miss."

"Stand up, Susan. What do you want?"

Please, miss, I wish to ask about our class mascot."

"What do you wish to ask Susan?"

"She is a little stuffed rabbit. She used to sit up on the window-ledge. She has been there since before any of us came. I wonder if it might be in order to enquire as to her whereabouts."

Miss Wellard smiled at the quaint turn of phrase.

"I do not consider the classroom a fit place for soft toys, Susan. Resume your seat."

It was not a very satisfactory answer, but Susan hadn't been eaten and Miss Wellard had smiled. Perhaps she was not such a dragon after all. The drum-skin tension that had prevailed in the class since this morning began to relax. As Miss Wellard turned to write something on the blackboard, Carol, leaned forward and whispered to Susan:

"You should have asked if we could have her back."

Instantly Miss Wellard turned round.

"Who whispered?" she asked in her pleasant, well-modulated voice. Carol raised her hand.

"Name?"

"Carol, miss."

"Stand up, Carol, and come to the front of the class." Carol obeyed.

"Whispering, Carol, is something I will not tolerate in my classes.

Nobody speaks in my classes except me, unless they are speaking to me and with my permission. Do you understand, Carol?"

"Yes, miss."

"I regret, Carol, that I must give you one stroke of the strap in order to ensure that you treat my classes with proper respect from now forward."

Carol was a mischievous and resilient girl who had been strapped by Miss Carshalton more often than most of the class. On several occasions she had endured a dozen strokes. The mildness of Miss Wellard's sentence was, therefore a relief to her and to the class as a whole—nevertheless, something in the mistress's manner maintained the air of dark foreboding which hung over the room. The punishment sounded mild, but it was evident that Miss Wellard did not consider it mild. That *should* have been a reassuring sign. It *should* have meant that, while her manner was strict, her standards of punishment were decidedly softer than her predecessor's. Yet somehow, the class, and Carol in particular, felt uneasy.

Miss Wellard opened her desk and produced a strap. It was lighter in colour than Miss Carshalton's strap, and looked rather wider and heavier. It seemed very fresh and new, unlike Miss Carshalton's old, well-worn strap, and very stiff indeed, remaining almost rigid when picked up. It looked rather a formidable implement: still, only one stroke——

"Which hand do you write with?" asked Miss Wellard,

"My right, miss."

"Hold out your left hand, in front of you. If you move it in the least, you will be very sorry."

Carol held out her hand, palm upward, the fingertips pointing toward the mistress. Miss Wellard raised the strap until her right hand was almost touching her shoulder, and the strap hanging over the shoulder, down her back. She stayed in this rather curious position for some moments, gauging her stroke. Her manner was very careful and methodical, as if she was following out to the letter the method in which she had been instructed. Then she brought down the strap in a great arc. It landed resoundingly along the length of Carol's outstretched hand. Carol's eyes widened in shock and she emitted a small, plaintive "Oh!"

That cry, slight as it was, sent a wave of consternation through the class. They had all seen Carol suffer a dozen hard strokes across her bare thighs above the tops of her stockings in absolute silence, and they all knew from personal experience how painful Miss Carshalton's strapings were. And the very nature of Carol's cry was so uncharacteristic—plaintive, shocked, crushed, almost wounded. So very unlike the boisterous, nonchalant Carol.

"Return to your seat," commanded Miss Wellard.

After a strapping, Carol always made a point of walking back with unruffled dignity. Not, of course, the cocksure, slouching swagger of a barbarian brat, but with a demeanour that demonstrated to the class that while the punishment may have had the desired effect, she was still wholly in command of herself, still the usual, good-humoured, whimsical, clever, ironical Carol. Today she found her way back to her desk clutching her hand. Her eyes, normally full of intelligent twinkle, met nobody's but stared vacantly into an inward world of pain. For the rest of the afternoon, the atmosphere of chastened, in-turned quiet from the normally extrovert Carol could be felt from the other side of the room—and in consequence, a secondary quietude fell over the whole class.

"What was it like?" they asked, when lessons were finally over.

And Carol, who had made light of the worst of Miss Carshalton's whippings, said simply: "It was *awful*."

The strap was not used often in Miss Wellard's class, but whenever it was used, it was used in that way. With Miss Carshalton, some girls had been dreadfully afraid of the strap, and would do anything to avoid it; most kept out of trouble as far as possible, but took some risks and accepted it bravely enough when they were punished; a few, like Carol, seemed not to mind very much at all, and while the school's accepted standards of decency and honour stopped them behaving really repulsively, as children did in the Pit, they were in scrapes of one sort or another most of the time. Now all the girls were in the position of the few timid ones. Miss Wellard's strap was something to be avoided at all costs by every one. A kind of awed hush fell over the class. Standards of work and behaviour rose and an electrical tension that was at once oppressive, intelligent and subtly exciting pervaded the new life upon which the girls had entered.

Other than these very occasional and profoundly-dreaded hand-strappings, no corporal punishment took place in Miss Wellard's class. The strap, rather than being kept in full view, was hidden away in the mistress's desk and only seen half a dozen times or so in the course of a month, yet its unseen presence hung over the class every minute of every day. Otherwise, Miss Wellard set lines, in rather larger doses than Miss Carshalton ever had. Two or three hundred, rather than the standard hundred being her usual minimum. She also enjoyed setting homework of a particularly tedious kind. For example, when she set exercises—either in class or for homework—she would sometimes insist that all the questions were first written out, and then each individual question written out again before it was answered. She would insist, with dire

warnings, upon the most meticulous neatness, which made the work take far longer, since no one dared risk one of her heart-oppressing impositions, or even the strap. For she could, upon occasion, and seemingly upon whim, bring out that dreadful strap for untidiness of handwriting.

While the girls not infrequently complained that this emphasis on neatness, repetition and fiddlesome care was unnecessary and 'useless', it was undeniable that over time, levels of concentration, educational achievement and capacity for thought, consistently improved. Discipline stretches and concentrates the mind, which, like the body, has its standards of fitness—just as doing press-ups or running on the spot improve the performance of a boxer, although to the ignorant they may appear to be 'pointless' exercises which have nothing to do with boxing. This was well understood by many educational theorists before the Eclipse and was coming to be increasingly and scientifically realised by the educational theorists of the Empire, who, alone among the world's educational minds, were at liberty to consider the problems of education freely, untrammelled by the tendentious ideologies promulgated by the powerful, intolerant and stupid cliques entrenched in the 'official' educational system of the Pit.

Miss Wellard was, in fact an 'advanced' mistress within the Imperial system, taking the new science of education as it was being forged above the grip of the Pit, and applying it with a special rigour which sprang from her own nature. This was her first appointment as a schoolmistress, and her inexperience, rather than breeding hesitancy, gave rise, as it sometimes does, to a confidence which was perhaps at times a shade too complete and might mellow a little in the next year or two. Nonetheless, she was a born teacher and a born disciplinarian, and her influence on the class was very much for the good.

One stroke on the non-writing hand was her standard punishment with the strap. It was dreaded alike by those who had suffered it and by those who had only witnessed its effect upon their classmates. Yet it was darkly obvious to all that, terrifying as this punishment was, it was the very minimum that could be given, and that next to this in order of severity lay a punishment *twice* as terrible as that which had so humbled the spirit of Carol. One stroke, however, was, for a long time, all that Miss Wellard ever gave, until it was conjectured that she was too much a creature of habit ever to give more; or perhaps even that she was not allowed to give more than that.

This latter notion had already passed into the half-sacred folklore of the school, solemnly retailed by young wiseacres as well-known and long-established fact, when Miss Wellard one day calmly and unknowingly exploded the theory.

Joyce was the immediate cause of this minor scientific revolution. Joyce was the acknowledged daredevil of the class, to whom Carol had only ever been a poor second. She certainly feared the new strap, but she had no intention of acknowledging her fear the way the others did, and indeed seemed somewhat scornful of the openly-avowed intimidation of the class. Her behaviour certainly changed, and she did not risk nearly as many pranks and adventures as she had done in Miss Carshalton's day, but she felt it incumbent upon her to retain a degree of what she considered to be self-respect—to maintain before her classmates a certain devil-may-care about the strap whatever her inward feelings might be.

In this she displayed, perhaps, a somewhat more boyish (or at any rate 'brunette') attitude than the rest of the class: one less touched by the Cult of Femininity. Each of the other girls, like Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, found no discomfort in saying of herself:—"I am a right maid for my cowardice." While there was a proper place for courage—one should tell the truth despite all consequences; if one ever had to stand up for the Empire against the Pit, one would be prepared to die if need be—there was nothing either unmaidenly or unbecoming in submission to discipline or in timidity in the face of severity. Courage was a virtue to be directed outward at the enemy, not inward toward the just authorities of one's own world.

Carol's spirit may have been crushed somewhat forcibly, but the reader will misunderstand entirely if she imagine that this crushing was a matter of sheer brute subjugation or rape of the will, as it probably would have been between males and certainly would have been between barbarians of either sex. Carol was taken by main force from one state of mind to quite another: but that other, when she swiftly reached it, was neither alien nor wholly displeasing to her. She was carried, without her will (but not precisely *against* her will), from the land of jaunty self-dominion to the land of quiet and tremulous submission. It was a land whereof all the girls had knowledge and none (with the exception of Ella) were small-souled enough to despise. Even Joyce's attitude was highly ambiguous, but she was one of those who required a deal of severity before she could find her feminine, submissive heart, and who, perhaps, unconsciously felt the need to court that severity.

However that may be, Joyce had suffered the ministration of the dreadful strap more times than any other girl in the class. With Miss Carshalton's chastisements she had found it possible to clench her teeth and bear it. Miss Wellard's strap was not really bearable in the same way. To the uninitiated it may seem absurd to speak of 'bearable' and 'unbearable' punishments in this way, since all are, in fact, borne, and

usually borne with outward fortitude. We confess that the distinction *is* absurd and is due to a defect in the language. Nonetheless, no one who has lived for any time in a world governed by feminine corporal punishment will deny that there is a distinction between the 'bearable' and the 'unbearable' punishment, and even—more absurdly yet, from the standpoint of logic—that some 'unbearable' punishments are more 'unbearable' than others. Of course the language is faulty, but the meaning is still clear to any one who has experience of these matters, and we have discovered as yet no better way of expressing them.

Miss Wellard's entire system was based upon the 'unbearable' punishment given infrequently rather than the 'bearable' punishment given more frequently. In this she was not directly reflecting the teaching of the most advanced Imperial educational theory, but rather her own rather austere interpretation thereof. Many would hold that more frequent 'bearable' punishments are a great aid to building the sensibility of girls, while 'unbearable' ones should be kept in reserve as an ultimate sanction, and used much less frequently than Miss Wellard used them. These two schools of discipline have probably existed for as long as feminine corporal punishment itself—that is, for the entire history of the human species.

'Bearable' punishments, in Miss Wellard's system, were always non-corporal, for all her corporal punishments were designed to be 'unbearable'. In many cases her non-corporal punishments themselves seemed to border on the unbearable, as on the occasion when Joyce was nonchalantly awarded eight hundred lines for talking in class. Not for *really* talking in class—not for chattering, or even whispering to her neighbour, while a lesson was in progress. That always merited the strap, and hardly ever happened in Miss Wellard's class. No, Joyce was only talking while Miss Wellard was out of the room, after she had told the girls to work in silence. Most of the girls had whispered just a *tiny* bit, falling silent as soon as the mistress's step was heard at the end of the corridor (it is even possible that she let herself be heard), but Joyce, braver than most, rather than breaking off in mid-sentence, finished what she had to say, and Miss Wellard, catching the last faint sibilant of a whisper with preternaturally sharp ears as she opened the door, asked of the blackboard as she marched briskly to the front of the class:

"Who was speaking when I entered?"

Joyce raised her hand.

"Eight hundred lines, Joyce." She did not even look at the poor girl. She did not need to tell her what the line was, because every Monday morning she wrote a line on the board for the class to copy into their books. This line was then the class's 'standard line'. Whenever she said

"Two hundred lines, Lavinia," or "Carol, take three hundred lines," without setting a particular line for them to write, they knew that they must copy out the week's Standard Line the stated number of times. It saved Miss Wellard's time and made it easier to impose long and tedious impositions upon the girls with a minimum of trouble to herself. A very efficient, modern system.

This particular week she had been feeling rather sterner than normal on Monday morning, and, casting about for a moment, had written :

I must do everything in my power to act, think, speak and live as a young lady should, in submission to my superiors and in obedience to the rules imposed upon me for my good.

The girls had groaned inwardly as she wrote it on the board. After *I must do everything in my power to act, think, speak and live as a young lady should*, she paused for some time, seeming to be finished, and that seemed quite long enough. Then she added *in submission to my superiors*, and finally, after another pause for consideration, added *and in obedience to the rules imposed upon me*. Seeming satisfied she turned away, and then turned back, rubbed out the full stop, and added *for my good*, as a final flourish, turning back to the class with a prim, satisfied little smile to bustle them on to the other business of the day. What an absolute *brute* of a line, and she *never* set less than two hundred. One would have to be very careful this week.

And she set Joyce *eight hundred*, just for that *ghost* of a whisper as she entered the room. Probably she did not even remember at that moment how long she had made the Standard Line, and she said it not with the conscious deliberation of one who intends to teach a girl a good lesson. She said it without looking at Joyce beyond the glance necessary to ascertain the identity of the raised hand. She said it as she opened her desk to get out a book, so off-handedly that she might have been telling her the time. She hardly sounded as if she was fully aware of what she was saying. *Was* she?

Eight hundred lines was an almost unheard-of imposition, even in Miss Wellard's class. Lavinia, of course, had done impositions of that length and longer, but almost no one else had. Once or twice, Miss Carshalton had set very long impositions, in addition to a strapping or a caning, for quite serious school crimes, but Miss Wellard's class was so well behaved : only quite minor offences were ever committed.

Eight hundred lines, and set so very absent-mindedly. Did she really know what she had said? As Joyce began her gargantuan task that evening, she debated the point with herself. It seemed impossible that a mistress would set such an outstanding imposition so casually. Perhaps it had been a slip of the tongue. She worked and worked, grinding out

the hateful imposition, line by line, very carefully, because she knew the mistress to be capable of rejecting a task of any length for untidiness, which always meant the strap as well as repetition—and sometimes a doubling of the imposition.

By the second day of work—using all her spare time—she was nearing the completion of a hundred and fifty. The line was so long, and the work had to be quite slow to maintain the required standard of neatness. It was, by then Friday, and it was clear she would have to work all weekend to have it ready by Monday morning—the usual deadline for longer impositions.

Two other circumstances conspired to weave the web of fate in which Joyce was to become ensnared. The first, that Miss Wellard went away for the weekend on a private visit: the second, that Joyce, who was one of the school's two best tennis players, was due to play in an important tournament on Saturday. There was no question of Joyce's playing in the tournament *and* completing the lines. Nor was there any question as to the school regulations concerning such matters. Impositions came first. Any and every other activity must be sacrificed if it was necessary to complete an imposition. That was part of the punishment. Without Joyce, the school's chances against T—— College, the Imperial school against which they were playing, would be slim indeed. She knew that the class and the school as a whole would feel terribly 'let down' by her if she failed to play—though not nearly as 'let down' as she would feel herself.

Had Miss Wellard really intended to set eight hundred lines in that off-hand manner? Had it been a slip of the tongue? Joyce really should have asked her before she left for the weekend, but she had half-deliberately postponed the enquiry, for another thought was forming itself in her mind. It was *possible* that the mistress had merely intended to set her usual two hundred, but it was also possible that, even if eight hundred had been intended, since they were set in such an unemphatic manner, Joyce might have misheard or misunderstood her. It was on this defence that Joyce at last decided to rest. She made up her mind to write two hundred lines, present them to the mistress, and if it transpired that eight were really intended to claim to have misheard her. It was a bold stroke and not a very honourable one—but the honour of the school on the tennis court was also at stake.

Joyce acquitted herself well in the tournament. It was close-fought, with the School winning the doubles and T—— college winning the singles. Without Joyce, T—— would have walked over the School completely. It was not until Monday morning that Joyce had the smallest doubt that her decision had been the right one. The School had

held its own. Her excuse was quite a reasonable one. In any case, what kind of a mouse was it that dared not take the occasional risk? And what was Miss Wellard? A monster? She was only a schoolmistress, after all.

It was only as the first lesson drew nigh that her assurance began to fade at the edges. Miss Wellard, back from her visit, seemed once more an intractable reality rather than a concept manipulable to the mind, and as the encounter drew closer, Joyce felt that deep, gnawing ache in the pit of her stomach which is fear of a certain doom. As she contemplated entering the classroom, she became fully conscious of that which she had known, but known only vaguely, over the weekend.—That the world outside Miss Wellard's class and the world inside it were two quite different worlds; worlds that ran according to different laws of nature. The finishing of breakfast, the harsh clangour of the lesson bell, the clatter of feet and gabbled last-minute snatches of conversation were all parts of the Rite of Transition between one world and another.

Once in the lesson, she was in Miss Wellard's universe—that world in which Miss Wellard was the central and all-compelling reality. Before Miss Wellard spoke a word, she knew that her excuse was pitiful; she wondered how she could ever have imagined otherwise.

"Joyce, have you completed your imposition?"

"Yes, miss."

"I trust it kept you pleasantly occupied for the weekend."

"Some part of it, miss."

"Some part of it. I hope you have not been working hastily, or your next weekend will be spent in repeating the task."

There was no doubt now about the mistress's intention. She *had* set eight hundred lines. Joyce still affected perfect innocence as she handed over her lines with an air of well-meaning incomprehension.

Miss Wellard looked over the slender sheaf of paper for a few seconds.

"How many lines are here, Joyce?"

"Two hundred, miss."

"How many did I set you?"

"Well—I thought you set me two hundred, miss."

"You thought I set you two hundred. Is my enunciation so poor, Joyce, that when I say 'eight hundred' it sounds like 'two hundred'?"

"I don't think so, miss."

"But you clearly heard me say 'two hundred lines' last week?"

Joyce was a straightforward girl with a dislike of deception. She found herself horribly out of her depth. "Not clearly, miss—no, I wasn't quite sure."

"You were not quite sure." Miss Wellard fixed her with an expectant stare, as if some further contribution was required.

Eventually the child stammered: "You did not seem to have the manner of setting such a large imposition."

"My *manner*, child, is my own affair. My *words*, I take it, were clear enough."

"Yes, miss."

"Is it your place to obey my orders, child, or to place strange and esoteric interpretations upon what you deem to be my *manner*?"

"To obey your orders, miss,"

"Then why did you not do so?"

"I was confused, miss."

"Confused." The disdainful reiteration dropped into a silence deeper and more chilling than any the class could remember. It was perhaps twenty seconds of objective and an hour of subjective time before the mistress chose to break it. "And what, if you were 'confused', do you imagine would have been the proper course?"

"To ask you, miss."

"To ask me. Exactly so. And why did you not ask me?"

"You were away, miss."

"I warn you very seriously not to try my patience, child. I went away on Friday evening. You had two full days in which to consult me about any 'confusion' which may have arisen in your mind. Two full days, Joyce."

Again the expectant silence into which Joyce could only offer up a plaintive "Yes, miss."

"Have you anything else to say which might prevent me from dealing with this matter as a case of simple, direct and wholly unmitigated disobedience?"

"No, miss."

"Very well, stand up."

Joyce rose to her feet, scraping her chair as quietly as possible.

"Come to the front of the class."

As Joyce made her way forward, Miss Wellard opened her desk and took out the terrible strap.

"There is no need for me to ask with which hand you write, is there, Joyce?"

"No, miss."

"I have had to strap you more often than I consider proper. Very well. Hold out your hand."

As before, Joyce extended her palm toward the mistress. The strap descended with its pistol-report, leaving Joyce in a haze of shock and pain. Through the haze came a word which she could hardly believe.

"Again."

Slowly she became aware that she was to be given a second stroke. Haltingly and with dread, following Miss Carshalton's established practice for hand-strappings, she extended her other hand.

"Not your right hand," said Miss Wellard impatiently, "Your left hand again." What else, after all, did 'again' mean?

To Joyce, everything seemed to take place with a dream-like slowness. Surely Miss Wellard could not intend to strap her poor hand again? Why, she could hardly bear to *touch* it. Yet even in her disbelief, she found that she was automatically obeying the instruction. Miss Wellard placed the strap over her shoulder, taking aim carefully; doing everything as if she herself had been an obedient schoolgirl, in a conscientious by-the-book manner that seemed somehow oddly assorted with the terrible, blinding pain she was wilfully inflicting.

The strap fell again, and for the first time since any one had known her, a cry of distress broke from Joyce's lips: an entirely involuntary cry, feminine and shrill, though not very loud. She clutched her hand to herself, as almost every girl does when she receives a stroke from a strap of this type delivered with such force as Miss Wellard commanded. Joyce had, perhaps purposely, refrained from this instinctive gesture in the past, but now she clasped her throbbing hand as tightly and tremulously as the timidest girl in the class.

"Again," said Miss Wellard quietly but firmly. Joyce, clasping her stricken hand turned her dark eyes upon the mistress in a look of mute appeal. Usually the smallest delay in obeying a command brought swift retribution from Miss Wellard, but this time she seemed to understand. "I know, child. It is not pleasant, is it? But you are going to have to learn your lesson. Disobedience and rebellion cannot be permitted. Hold out your hand again. Support it with your right hand." Despite the tinge of kindness in her voice, there was no doubt that Joyce would disobey the command a second time only at her extreme peril. With a look of hollow resignation she presented her puffed and reddened palm again, resting it stiffly on her other hand.

Miss Wellard raised the strap over her shoulder again. Each stroke was delivered in exactly the same way. Carefully, deliberately, with the air of a girl repeating her lesson. If she was tempted to lessen the force of the stroke in response to the girl's obvious suffering, she resisted the temptation by erring in the opposite direction. A flicker of concentrated determination crossed her normally impassive face as she brought the strap down. The report was louder than ever. And then the unthinkable happened. Joyce burst into tears. Joyce just was not the sort of girl who cried, certainly not in public; but her pride did not seem important any more, and in any case she had no power to re-

strain herself. Miss Wellard placed an unexpected arm round the girl's neck.

"There, there. It's all over now. Do you think you have learned your lesson?" Joyce nodded wordlessly, genuinely grateful for the mistress's kindness. "Return to your place, then."

Miss Wellard tore Joyce's two hundred lines in two and dropped them in her waste-basket. "Eight hundred lines, Joyce, by next Monday. Last week's line, of course." This week's line was much shorter, but none of this mattered much at the moment to Joyce. She walked back to her place, white and ghost-like. Miss Wellard did not expect her to take any part in the lesson, as indeed she could not have done, despite the fact that her writing hand was untouched. After about half an hour, Miss Wellard did another unexpected thing.

"Susan," she said, "take Joyce for a walk in the grounds. Do not be longer than twenty minutes."

It seemed the oddest request. Excusing Susan from her work was quite unlike Miss Wellard; and why Susan? She was not even a friend of Joyce's.

Susan felt rather awkward conducting the bigger and normally much more confident girl down the corridor and into the open air, and shepherding her round the grounds. Joyce seemed quite gentle and acquiescent but rather far away. Her arm hung limply at her side. Susan talked in her gentle way about the beauty of the trees and the bird-songs, and although Joyce said almost nothing there was an air of appreciation which Susan could feel very strongly.

"Does it still hurt?" asked Susan.

"Yes," said Joyce, "it does rather."

Susan knew that if it had only hurt 'rather', Joyce would have denied the pain altogether. Most of Joyce's regular friends would have commiserated and talked about what a 'beast' Miss Wellard was. Joyce felt glad that Susan said nothing of the sort. Something quite strange and special had taken place between Joyce and the mistress and although Joyce did not fully understand it, she was grateful not to have it exposed to the unsubtle glare of ordinary schoolgirl criticism. Susan seemed to understand something of the state she was in; the strange blending of pain and quietness, shock and a certain sweet, heightened sensitivity. This, perhaps, was why Miss Wellard had chosen Susan.

Chapter 8

The Valley of the Shadow of Death

THIS INCIDENT had a profound effect upon the class, increasing the awe in which Miss Wellard was held and greatly intensifying the general fear and consternation when the mistress announced that a special examination was to be held after half-term and that any girl who failed, in Miss Wellard's estimation, to achieve a mark reflecting her best efforts would be subject to severe discipline. Miss Wellard was at pains to emphasise that the severity of the punishment would increase steeply in proportion to the discrepancy between a girl's capacity and her achievement.

Despite the fact that Joyce's punishment was clearly exceptional, there was a fear on the part of several of the girls that a poor showing in the examination might result in multiple hand-strappings, and many were in a lamentable state of nerves as the fateful day approached.

It was on the Monday before the exam, which fell on a Thursday, that Ella, finding Lavinia alone, thrust a sheaf of papers into her hands.

"Take a look at those," she said.

The papers were printed and contained a series of questions on the subjects the class had been studying over the term. Naïvely, Lavinia browsed over them for several minutes before suspicion began to dawn.

"What *are* these?" she finally asked in a hesitant voice.

"The exam., of course, you idiot," said Ella. "*We* shan't have to worry about the Wellard's punishments. Let the other poor fish put their fins out for the strap."

"Where did you get them?"

"Borrowed them from the Wellard's room. It's all right, she's taking tea in the summer-house with a venerable aunt or some-such. I'll have them back long before they're missed."

"Oh, you cad," burst out Lavinia.

"What do you mean, 'cad'?"

"Do you seriously think I would take advantage of your mean cheating? I've seen too many of the questions now. I'll have to tell Miss Wellard so she can change them."

"You mean you'll snitch on me?"

"Of course I won't say your name."

"Don't be a fool, she'll make you."

"I don't believe so."

"But look, I've taken those papers fair and square——"

"'Fair and square'—you don't know the meaning of the words, you blackguard."

"If you tattle to the Wellard our friendship is finished."

"Perhaps that is for the best in any case."

"It won't be for the best for you, you smug little worm."

"Now look here, Ella: as a matter of fact I could have answered most of these questions without cheating. If I'd seen this paper on Thursday morning I'd have been delighted. Now I've to tell Miss Wellard so she can change them to ones I probably won't be able to do—all thanks to you. And if you think going to Miss Wellard is my idea of fun you're an idiot—especially when I've got to keep your name out of it at all costs. You've put me in an absolutely beastly position."

Ella said nothing. She did not want to antagonise Lavinia in case she should change her mind and tell Miss Wellard that she had stolen the papers. Any one else would have been grateful for her loyalty in this matter, but Ella's sense of gratitude was as deficient as her sense of honour, and Lavinia could feel that she had made an enemy.

An hour later she knocked tentatively on the mistress's door.

"Was that a knock?"

"Yes, miss."

"Come in then, come in."

Lavinia came in.

"When a girl knocks like that she has usually been up to something. What have you been up to, Lavinia?"

"Nothing, miss, only——"

"Only what?"

"Only I think you ought to change the questions for Thursday's examination."

"Do you, indeed, and why is that?"

"I am afraid I have inadvertently seen them."

"Inadvertently? They have been in this room all the time."

"Not all the time, miss."

"I see. Some one has removed them and replaced them?"

"Yes, miss."

"Not you, I take it."

"No, miss."

"I suppose there is no point in asking who it was?"

"I really don't feel I can answer that, miss."



Miss Wellard positioned the strap over her shoulder in the same studied and meticulous manner that she always used.

"I understand. Schoolgirl honour. But in this case, Lavinia, it is misplaced. Whoever has done this thing is not the sort of girl we can afford to have here. She is a viper in our midst; a threat to the spirit of the school. We cannot allow attitudes like this to grow by covering them up. Won't you consider telling me?"

"I know you are right miss, but you see, she came to me in good faith—if you can call it that—I don't see how I can just betray her."

"Very well, I shan't press you. But please think it over. Your first duty is to the school and to the order of our world, not to a dishonourable little wretch who thinks nothing of deceit and treachery."

Lavinia was silent for an uncomfortable minute. She knew that Miss Wellard was right. Schoolgirl honour—especially toward a girl who had no honour herself—seemed a very small thing compared with the protection of the high and sacred values which allowed her and others to escape from the evil grip of the Pit. In the eternal war between good and evil. Miss Wellard was on one side and Ella—however stupidly and unconsciously—on the other, and there could be no real doubt which was which; and yet she had given her word—or *almost* given it. Suddenly the mistress changed the subject.

"How did you find the paper, Lavinia?"

"As a matter of fact, miss, I rather liked it. I felt I could have answered the questions pretty satisfactorily. It was really quite unfortunate from my point of view that I had to see them and report the matter to you."

"Well, thank you for being honest, Lavinia. If you choose to identify the culprit you may do so at any time. I shall respect your decision in either case."

"She really is a brick, isn't she?" said Susan when Lavinia told her the story.

"Yes," said Lavinia. "I always felt she would be decent about it. I must admit I was frightened when I knocked on her door, but I never had any real doubt that she would be understanding."

"Yes, she is very stern, but she is never unreasonable. I rather like her, don't you?"

Lavinia considered the matter. "Yes, I think I do, though she seemed like a beast at first. She rather grows on you, doesn't she?"

Most of the class, if the truth were known, were beginning to feel the same. Miss Wellard, despite her autocratic ways, was winning a place, through her intelligence, integrity and fair dealing, in the hearts of her charges. Perhaps they would never quite come to love her as they had loved Miss Carshalton, but when the time came for her to leave them—an event which was to occur sooner and more suddenly than any, Miss

Wellard herself included, could possibly suspect—they would miss her almost as much.

The examination came, and to Lavinia's astonishment, when she turned over the printed papers they were exactly the same ones that she had seen on Monday. Miss Wellard had made no changes after all. Lavinia was delighted as she sailed through the questions, but somewhat troubled. Surely Ella was not to be allowed to profit by her cheating?

The answer to this question came immediately after the examination. A furious Ella cornered Lavinia, saying: "You didn't go to the Wellard after all. You might have told me, you beast!"

"I *did* go to her. I've no idea why the questions weren't changed. Anyway, why are you complaining. You knew them all in advance, didn't you?"

"Yes—knew which ones *not* to study. I've been driving myself mad the last two days working up every topic *except* the ones in that wretched paper because I thought the Wellard was bound to cut them out."

Lavinia could not suppress a small giggle at the poetic justice of it. "Well, Miss Wellard was one jump ahead of you then, wasn't she?"

As might have been expected under the circumstances, Ella's performance in the examination was well below the standard that might reasonably have been expected of her. Most of the girls whose results were below par received heavy doses of lines and extra work. Only two were called to the front of the class to hold out their hands for an agonising stoke of Miss Wellard's dreaded strap, but Ella received one stroke on each hand. She was the only girl ever to have received more than one stroke with the exception of Joyce, and she returned to her seat white and shaken. Lavinia wondered whether Miss Wellard had chosen to punish her in this way because her selective study had made her results so entirely abominable or because, while she could find no proof, she had a shrewd suspicion who was the thief and would-be cheat of the class.

"I think she guessed," said Susan afterwards.

"Perhaps—I just don't know," said Lavinia.

"I know," said Susan.

Lavinia laughed. "How can you?"

"Because I think I know Miss Wellard. She is very fair and very set in her methods. She knows her strap is a terrible ordeal. She means it to be. She would not really give it for bad exam. results. Every one got lines and impots. Jane and Sally got the strap because they were out-and-out idlers but she just about *never* gives more than one stroke. If she does, she must consider the offence very serious—that's my reasoning, anyway."

"But if she's so fair, how can she punish a girl so severely when she has no proof."

"She acts on her instincts, I think, and she is not a fool. Who else *could* have done such a thing? There are only about four girls in the class wild enough for such an enterprise, but only one of them is a sneak of that sort. Joyce, Carol and Rowena would all have the nerve for it, but only Ella would stoop to it; and then she fell into the little trap of the unchanged paper. Miss Wellard guessed that the culprit would do exceptionally badly because she knew the matter had been reported and knew what the questions were and so would avoid revising them. Ella *did* do exceptionally badly. It did not quite *prove* her guilt, but it confirmed what was a near-certainty already."

"Close enough proof for one on each hand?"

"Yes. If she could have proven it openly, it would have been two."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes," said Susan. Her firm, pretty little mouth was very positive about it. She knew her Miss Wellard and approved of her. This gentle, sensitive girl could be primly unmerciful in matters of justice.

"I think two were enough for Ella. Did you see her face? She was as white as a sheet. I truly believe she would have fainted away on the fourth stroke, if not the third."

"It would have been for her good in the long run," said Susan demurely.

The long summer days fled by. The friendship between Susan and Lavinia grew ever closer. Lavinia saw Susan's poems and genuinely admired them. She was so glad she could as she had met a few people in the Pit who wrote 'poetry'—or rather appalling, pretentious prose stuffed with trite and predictable 'oddities' and 'eccentricities', stripped of grammatical structure and broken more or less randomly into short lines. Susan's verses were cleverly scanned, rhyming compositions in a neo-romantic idiom, which used the discipline of the form to enhance her deep and turbulent adolescent passions and to express *nuances* of feeling which could really be expressed in no other way.

Lavinia began to write some verse herself and was deeply gratified when Susan said a piece was good. Susan, for all her timidity and kindness, could never say a verse was good when she did not think so. She would say: "it is a lovely thought," or "the rhymes are very neat". Only after some time did she first say. "Oh, Lavinia, you've done it. That really is a poem."

Susan, on her side, was starting to come out of herself. She played tennis with Lavinia most evenings, and often they would play doubles

with other girls from their set. Susan was becoming more popular, more "one of the pettes".

It was on the way to one of those doubles tournaments that Jill had set Lavinia the three hundred lines—those fateful lines during the writing of which her whole Imperial life had drifted in review through her mind, rather as the life of a drowning man is said to pass before his eyes. The analogy is an apt one, for, as she wrote the final lines and tidied the papers neatly in front of her, Lavinia could not possibly know how close she was to the complete destruction of her Imperial life—the only life that ever had been or ever could be *life* to her rather than hollow, meaningless existence.

She picked up the sheaf of paper to take it to her curtained-off dormitory cubicle, where she would store it in her bedside cupboard until the time came to hand it in to Jill. No greater worry disturbed her mind than the doubt as to whether—careful as she had been—Jill would capriciously reject her afternoon's work and condemn her to further hours of tedious labour and the loss of more of her beloved tennis.

She sat down on her bed and was startled by a strange rustling or crackling sound. She felt already the first surge of an alarm that was to grow minute by minute as events unfolded. Pulling back her neat bedspread, she discovered a large broadsheet bongo newspaper of the 'better' (or, as the barbarians so idiotically say, 'quality') sort. She felt an immediate revulsion. Barbarian newspapers were not allowed in the school, and never seen in the Empire at large. They were regarded as agents of all that is foul in the Pit, outclassed in vileness only by the television and educational systems. This particular sort of newspaper Lavinia had always despised, long before her Imperial days. The crass and stupid vulgarity of the lower-class tabloids is positively healthy in comparison to the smug, shallow intellectual turpitude of the 'quality' barbarian press: so superciliously cynical toward every remaining vestige of decency or beauty in their poisoned world; so bonelessly sycophantic before the forces of decay and degeneration.

But what on earth was the filthy thing doing here, on her bed? She noticed that it was folded back to reveal a particular page. Her eye was drawn to a prominent headline which read "Strapping School". As she skimmed over the accompanying article she became aware that it was about *this* school—about Miss Wellard and her classmates. At first it seemed impossible. The word-picture of the school bore almost no resemblance to the reality; it made everything seem ugly, lurid and barely sane (how readily the Pit projects its own qualities on all it sees). As she read more closely it became clear that the facts, lurking deep beneath the miasma of distortion and innuendo, were not, for the most part, whol-

ly and demonstrably *wrong*, (though hardly a single fact was precisely correct either, and the slant of the inaccuracies was too consistent to be accidental). The article was in fact a cunning tissue of twisted truth, half truth and petty lies—lies too trivial or uncheckable to be legally actionable, but nevertheless adding materially to the overall distortion. There was, for example, some mention of knickers being pulled down and bare bottoms being strapped, a thing which Lavinia had not once seen or heard of in all her time at the school, and certainly not during the reign of Miss Wellard, who had never strapped a bottom, bare or otherwise. But the deliberate inaccuracies were far from being the worst thing about the article—indeed facts, whether true or false, played only a very secondary rôle in the economy of the piece. The important thing was the grubby and lascivious atmosphere it conjured up by a hundred crafty touches. It was expertly written by the sort of journalist who could, if paid to do so, describe a telephone directory in such a way as to make it sound like a piece of sordid pornography.

The newspaper seemed to swim in a kind of fog before Lavinia, and it was as she was trying to re-orient herself that the import of the by-line finally penetrated her befuddled brain: *As told to Kate Lacquey by Lavinia Delacourt*. What did it mean? The whole thing was like a feverish nightmare. For a moment she began to wonder whether she *was* really awake, when an all-too-lifelike voice convinced her that this was not a dream.

"Lavinia Delacourt, are you in there?" It was one of the senior prefects. Lavinia folded the newspaper and tucked it back under the bedspread, trying desperately to minimise the inevitable rustle. It was not the wisest thing to do, but on the spur of the moment it was the only thing that occurred to her.

"Lavinia Delacourt, is that you?"

Lavinia emerged from behind her cubicle curtain and stood very straight, her arms by her sides.

"Here, miss."

The prefect pushed past her and entered her cubicle—an unheard-of breach of privacy, each girl's tiny cubicle being her one inviolable sanctum; but the prefect's manner brooked no argument. Lavinia heard a rustle that made her heart sink and the prefect emerged with the newspaper, folded tightly and held as if it had been something fished out of a cesspit.

"Follow me, Lavinia Delacourt."

Lavinia remembered the barked command from a 1930s naval film she had seen some weeks ago: "Prisoner and escort, *quick march!*" as she walked briskly along behind the prefect she felt just like the prisoner in the film. There was only one prefect. No one behind to make sure she didn't bolt. Girls didn't bolt at this school. They were trusted, even

when suspected of a terrible wrong. Or perhaps no one would care if she bolted now.

Where was she being taken? To Miss Wellard? What would she get? Six strokes of the strap? More? No, not Miss Wellard. They were already marching beyond the school corridors into the main part of the house. Suddenly Lavinia realised that she had *wanted* to see Miss Wellard. Miss Wellard would have listened to her. Despite all appearances, she might have believed her. How many people could possibly believe her under the circumstances? Yet she trusted Miss Wellard's instinct. She wanted to be tried by her.

They came to a halt outside Miss Hazeldean's study. The prefect knocked on the door.

"Come in," called Miss Hazeldean.

The prefect opened the door and motioned Lavinia in. She followed and closed the door behind her.

"I take it you know why you have been brought here, Lavinia Delacourt."

"Yes, Miss Hazeldean."

"Have you anything to say to me?"

"I didn't do it miss. I didn't know anything about it. I've only just found out."

"Have you anything to report, Clarice?" asked Miss Hazeldean.

The prefect put the paper on Miss Hazeldean's desk.

"This was in Lavinia Delacourt's possession. I believe she was reading it when I approached her, but when she became aware of my presence she attempted to hide it in her bed."

"How did you come by this—this newspaper, Lavinia?"

"It was in my bed."

"So do you contend that it was *not* you who concealed it there?"

"That's not true, madam," interposed the prefect. "I heard it rustle as she tucked it away."

"Lavinia?" said Miss Hazeldean.

"Yes, madam, I did put it there, but I was only putting it back where I found it."

"In your bed?"

"Yes, madam."

"Lavinia, you are in a very serious position. Your only hope is to tell me the whole truth."

"That is the truth, madam. It is all I know."

"Very well, Lavinia. You will have to leave."

"Oh, no, madam—please, madam—you can flog me, whip me till I bleed. I don't mind, only please don't send me away."

"Flog you? So that you can show the marks to your reporter friends? Sell the photographs at a hundred pounds a stripe? I hardly think so, Lavinia."

"But madam I beg you—"

"My child, this Empire is founded upon trust. You have always been able to trust us. We must be able to trust you. When we can no longer trust you, we can no longer keep you. It is as simple as that."

"But Miss Hazeldean, even if I had done it, would it harm you—harm us—so terribly? Is it unforgivable?"

"It may not actually harm us at all. Miss Wellard will probably have to go elsewhere, at least temporarily. That is an inconvenience. In actual fact, these vulgar little exposures usually do us more good than harm in a variety of ways which I have no intention of explaining to you. But that is not the point. The point is that you have collaborated with the enemy. You have accepted his sub-standard world as *the* world, taken his part against us, seen us through his eyes. Whatever your reasons, and whatever the result or lack of result of your actions, you have committed the cardinal offence. Even if we could forgive, we could never forget and never trust you again.

"I am sorry, Lavinia: I owe it to every one under my charge to send you away for ever."

"But can't I speak to——"

"No, Lavinia. You will not communicate with any one. You are *persona non grata*. You will leave in half an hour. If you are ever seen in these grounds after that we shall turn the dogs on you."

Lavinia was conducted to a small, bare room in which her belongings were brought to her, including the clothes she arrived in—the ones made for her by Mme. Gauvain. She changed in a fog of pain and incomprehension, and then, leaving her uniform behind, was taken to a huge, black 1930s limousine. She was put into the back seat and a severe, black-uniformed chauffeuse in a peaked cap and leather gauntlets climbed into the driver's seat. The car crunched down the gravel path as had the car that bore Amanda away from her—only now she was inside and the sense of utter desolation was a hundred times more intense than it had been on that day.

Some of the girls strolling on the lawn heard the car and looked round. They looked astonished to see Lavinia, for they knew nothing of what had happened and would not be told the full story. Among the group was Susan. She saw that her friend, with whom she had been chattering gaily only this morning, looked wan and terrible, her expressive eyes seemed twice their usual size and full of inexpressible, dumbfounded sadness. She ran toward the car with a wild gesture of en-

quiry. Lavinia raised her hands in a gesture of helplessness. The chauffeur put her foot on the accelerator, and the friends were parted.

Lavinia buried her head in her hands. She did not cry: she was yet too stunned for that. She smelt the good old leather of the seats, admired the solidly-built door-frames—the ineffable sense of *quality* in her immediate surroundings. She was still in the real world, for a little while longer she was in the real world, and then she would be pitched out into the garish chaos of the cheap and sub-standard—the world where nothing counted for anything. “In an ugly world the richest man can buy nothing but ugliness.” Who had said that? How true it was. How could Miss Hazeldean *possibly* believe that she had chosen that world above this one—this one that she was still, for a few precious minutes, living in, despite her pain and heartache. How could *any* sane person collaborate with that worthless Pit—yet somebody had, and Lavinia could guess who that somebody was.

After some time Lavinia began to feel concerned about the length of her journey. She had expected to be dropped a little way from the house, or perhaps taken to the nearest town but now the car had been speeding along country lanes for what seemed like a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes, and showed no signs of stopping. Lavinia was separated from the chauffeur by a strong pane of glass, so she spoke into the speaking tube:

“Where are we going?”

“London,” came the terse reply. It struck Lavinia like a blow. Her status had only been that of a schoolgirl, but never, in her entire Imperial life had she been addressed in that way by a servant. They always called her ‘miss’. The fact was brought brutally home to her that she had lost all caste. She was *persona non grata*—of no more account in the Empire than any bongo in jeans.

“Why London?”

“That’s where you came from, that’s where you go back to.”

“What if I don’t want to go as far as London?”

“You can try bailing out if you fancy it.”

The insolence wounded her. She had never heard an Imperial servant talk like that to any one. The car was doing fifty, and the idea of Lavinia’s leaping out and breaking a few bones seemed to appeal to the chauffeur as a mildly humorous notion. Vile girl.

But that was the trouble—she was not a vile girl. She was blonde, neat and quite attractive, a very good driver, and more than that, a very good chauffeur. Lavinia liked her, even from the little she had seen of her, and even in these hateful circumstances. Had things been otherwise, this uniformed girl might have been holding open a car door for her

with the pleasing respect and good will that made Imperial serving-girls so utterly delightful. But Lavinia was a traitor in this girl's eyes: a low, crawling thing who had turned upon her own people. Exile was too good for her.

Lavinia settled back, not to *enjoy* the ride—that would have been impossible—but to *ingest* it. Like a dying creature hanging on desperately to her last few minutes of life, she clung to her last hour in the Empire. However terrible it was, she was still breathing Imperial air, once she stepped out of the car, her Imperial life was over and she must suffocate in the cold and airless outer space of the world below.

All too quickly, the car drew up. She had been returned to the very street in which she used to live. Of course her flat was occupied by strangers now, and the gesture seemed a pointless one, but perhaps it was considered symbolic, or perhaps it conformed to some Imperial regulation. The chauffeuse departed without a word and Lavinia watched in anguish as the broad, friendly, chrome-gleaming back of the car turned at the end of the road and disappeared into the afternoon. The car was the last thread of *reality*. Now she was surrounded by cheap, garish tin boxes on wheels, painted in the tasteless colours of bad toys. Dull black rubber where the bright chrome should be seemed to typify the whole world they stood for. A white-haired grandmother passed by in a lurid pink track-suit advertising a patent fizzy drink; bovine unconsciousness of the wreck of her human dignity was stamped in fluorescent ink across her blank, unvenerable eyes. Children going home from school, their shirt-tails deliberately hanging out as if it had been part of the uniform—perhaps it was—their language foul, their brains prematurely decrepit. The hateful slick, moron-clever advertising posters; the “illegal” fly-posters for bands and singers, put up at the instigation of vast international record companies with the intention of looking rebellious and unofficial. Nothing, absolutely nothing anywhere, but what is ordained and controlled by the Machine. And everywhere the hordes, the endless hordes of the Pit; the drones of the Machine—the Great Brainwashed; without dignity, without tragedy; stripped of their history and with no future beyond the churning of the Machine. All Rebellious, all Independent, exactly as the Machine commands. All so terribly different. All so utterly the same. Each in her private chamber of the endless, centralised hell.

A yellow-plastic-wrapped policeman appears to be chewing gum. A blue-jowled thug with earrings and a pony-tail spits on the pavement. An office girl in foam-padded shoulders and stretch tights hurries home to her unmarried ‘partner’, not guessing that there has ever been anything else.

Lavinia had money. She had no immediate practical worries about where she would stay that night—not on the mere animal level of simple physical survival—and yet that was precisely the thing that was worrying her: where *was* she to stay that night, for she *could* not stay the night in the Pit. It seemed absurd to think that the world was so small that a handful of people called Imperials, a mere few dozen souls who had rejected her, were the entirety of the living population of the planet—or at any rate of this island. Yet it was so. The rest were—well, they were what she had seen. They had succumbed to the Machine. They were part of the unspeakable disease that had overspread the once-civilised world since the Eclipse. There was no getting away from it. England was gone. There was only the Empire and the Pit; and she could not spend even a single night in the Pit. She had felt in the car that her soul would suffocate as soon as she got out into the corrupt air of the Pit, and now that she was in it she knew that she had been right. She felt herself in the grip of psychic asphyxia, gasping desperately for the air of a real world in the midst of this shoddy vacuum.

But where could she go? She would have liked to have talked to Miss Wellard, but that was impossible. She was not sure whether Miss Hazeldean's threat to turn the dogs on her had been real or metaphorical, but in either case there was no possibility of returning to P——House. She dearly wished she could find Amanda, but she had no idea where she was. There was Lady Chelverton, but again she had no notion of her address. There was only one Imperial household that she actually knew how to find, and that was Mme. Gauvain's establishment. For Lavinia there was no decision involved. She made her way to the Frenchwoman's house immediately

Chapter 9

The Grey Cinderella

DESPITE EVERYTHING, Lavinia's spirits began to rise. Suddenly she felt conscious of herself in the beautiful clothes Mme. Gauvain had made for her in the beginning. She felt the warm-and-cold cling of her 1950s nylons and imagined herself almost as fascinating as Lady Chelverton had been. Whatever else had happened, she was off on a new adventure, and for the first time since she had begun school, she felt herself a young lady rather than a child. It was not that she craved adulthood or independence. Indeed, she was going to offer herself wholly into the hands of Mme. Gauvain—it was the only thing she could do. No, it was a curious mixture of things. In the first place it was a sense of there being a *world* again, and air to breathe. After the claustrophobic feeling of being marooned in the utter void of the Pit, there was somewhere to go: ground to walk on; light to see by; other human beings.

In truth she did not greatly relish her present adventure. She would have given a great deal to be safely back at school. She did not trust the tender mercies of Mme. Gauvain in the least; but at the same time she felt the elation of one who has had, or hopes to have, a reprieve from certain death, and for whom even the prospect of life imprisonment takes on temporarily rosy colours. But it was more than a reprieve from death that was in question—it was the return to the land to the living of one who has already walked among the squeaking and gibbering shades of Sheol. As she rode on the top of a nearly-empty 'bus, those shades seemed already to be receding and losing their potency. The Pit might lie about her, but it had nothing to do with her. She was neither in it nor of it. She was an exquisitely dressed young Imperial off on an adventure which, however frightening or painful it might be, was entirely outside the Pit.

As she stepped off the 'bus and set off down the last few roads that led to her new life, she was filled with a spirit of romance and adventure that was entirely free from any sort of illusion. If anything, she expected worse from Mme. Gauvain than was actually in store, but comfort and happiness are scarcely the salient features of true adventure, or even of true romance. Her consciousness of the attractiveness of

her *chic* young Imperial *persona* was entirely unconnected with the hope that it might bring her any individual benefit. She regarded herself almost as an object of disinterested æsthetic contemplation. She suddenly realised that she was very *real*. Last time she had walked these streets she had been, if not a "bongo dressed up", at any rate a mutant: some one who had been, however unwillingly and unwittingly, transformed by the black alchemy of the Pit into a manner of creature that could not have existed before the Eclipse. Her time at school had changed her a lot: gradually, imperceptibly, as the hands of a clock move, she had been transformed into a real person.

As she reached the great guardian hedge of fuchsia, the elation she felt in her solar plexus was counterbalanced by a heavy knot in the pit of her stomach. She was afraid; there was no denying that, but she did not hesitate even for a moment. There was no other course. With measured tread, shoulders back, tummy in, one foot in front of the other, small steps, *slight* bend at the knees, just as she had been taught again and again in Deportment, she walked up the fuchsia avenue. She cast up a glance at the window where she had seen the curious girl on her first visit. The window was empty, and her nerves now occupied her so fully that she could not even think about it. She struggled with the recalcitrant bell-pull, setting off the terrible clanging noise that shivered her nerves still further.

The impeccably-uniformed parlourmaid opened the door. Her effect upon Lavinia was the precise opposite of what it had been the first time. Then she had unnerved her, now she made her feel safer and more reassured. She was used to uniformed maidservants. She liked them. They were there to serve one. They made one feel rooted in one's place in the world. The maid's attitude to Lavinia had also changed. Before she had been aloof and perhaps just a touch disapproving. Now she was properly deferential.

"I wish to see Mme. Gauvain," said Lavinia.

"We are not, I fear, open, miss" replied the maid. From the very few words she had spoken before, Lavinia had not realised that the girl was French. Now she perceived that her English was very broken indeed.

"I am not here on business," said Lavinia.

"Who shall I say, miss?"

"Lavinia Delacourt."

Lavinia was conducted into a small parlour where she waited for some ten minutes, admiring the very beautiful objects with which the mistress of the house surrounded herself.

Mme. Gauvain entered, and Lavinia rose to her feet respectfully. Her hostess did not take any obvious cognisance of the gesture.

"Miss Delacourt," she said, pronouncing the name in the French manner, without the final 't', "how you 'ave grown since I saw you last. You 'ave kep' your clothes beautifully, as if you 'ave 'ardly worn them."

"I haven't, I fear."

"Really—what 'ave you been wearing?"

"School uniform mostly."

"*Très bien*, and what is the nature, if I may ask it, of your visit?"

Lavinia swallowed. This was it.

"I have come to ask if you will take me in."

"Take you *in*?"

"As an assistant or a servant, or whatever you might have need of."

"Miss Hazeldean did not send you here, did she?" Mme. Gauvain spoke with certainty, as if she were well aware that there was no chance of Miss Hazeldean's sending one of her girls to this establishment.

"No," faltered Lavinia.

"So why 'ave you come here? Are you thrown out?"

The accuracy of the guess was disconcerting, but it was a relief not to have to say it oneself.

"Yes."

"Are you expelled from the Empire?"

"I suppose so."

"And you want me to break the law by taking you in?"

Was it actually breaking Imperial law? Lavinia realised that she had half-guessed it might be something of that order. She also realised that she *had* been half-expecting Mme. Gauvain to break laws, or at any rate regulations of some sort, on her behalf; nor did she feel now that she had been wrong. Mme. Gauvain's cold question had nothing about it of the quality of, say, Miss Wellard's likely reaction to being asked to break a law. She knew more of Imperial life now, and realised by her very manner that Mme. Gauvain was something of a rogue in Imperial terms.

"I'm sorry—I——"

"Nevair mind, nevair mind. Did you see the District Governess before you left P—— House?"

"No."

"That is something. *Alors*. I can take you as a general maid. You will be the lowest member of my household. You will do whatever you are told. If you do not give perfect satisfaction you will be whipped. Sometimes you may be whipped even if you do give perfect satisfaction—just for your good, or for some one's amusement. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Yes, madame."

"*Bien*. By the way, what did you do to get yourself thrown out?"

"Nothing, madame, it was a misunderstanding."

"Of course, but what did they say you did?"

"Gave a stupid story to a bongo newspaper, madame."

"Very well. Let me tell you this, Delacourt. If you try anything like that here, you won't get off with a whole skin. This is not P—— house and I am not Miss Hazeldean. Betray me and you'll regret it to the last day you live. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, madame," said Lavinia. Those words of Mme. Gauvain's rang in her ears for days, partly because they were so frighteningly pointed and partly because they were the last words of English she was to hear for some time.

Mme. Gauvain touched a silver bell and the parlourmaid came in. She was instructed in French to take Delacourt to the kitchen and set her to work at once, adding as an afterthought to ensure that she was beaten before she began.

As soon as they were out of earshot of Mme. Gauvain, the parlourmaid began to berate Lavinia sharply; she was not quite sure what for, as the whole of her rapid and furious monologue was in French, though she thought it might be for the way she handed her small suitcase to the maid on arrival, when she herself was coming to take up a position as the lowest of all maids. Whatever might be the reason, her ears were boxed sharply by the pretty serving-girl twice on the way to the kitchen and she was propelled into that room with her head spinning.

In the kitchen was a large, comely woman of middle years, Mme. Fournier, the cook-housekeeper and absolute ruler of the household servants. She seemed quite motherly in a no-nonsense sort of way. Leblanc, the parlourmaid, introduced Delacourt. Mme. Fournier fired a number of questions at her in French, of which Lavinia could make little sense. For the most part she stood dumbly or said "*Je ne comprend pas, madame.*" On one occasion she thought she had caught the drift of the question and answered with an enthusiastic "*Oui, madame,*" only to find both the housekeeper and Leblanc reduced almost to tears of laughter.

The parlourmaid then conveyed to Mme. Fournier the mistress's instruction that Delacourt should be beaten before she began work. The housekeeper shrugged her shoulders and took a wooden spoon from a drawer. She sat down and beckoned Delacourt to her. When the new maid came within grasping distance, the housekeeper seized her hand and pulled her roughly across her ample lap. Lavinia was impressed by the strength of the woman. She felt like a rag doll in her hands. Her skirts were lifted over her back, exposing her stocking-tops and her expensive underwear to the envious gaze of Leblanc. Mme. Fournier laid

the wooden spoon across Lavinia's naked white thighs with a resounding slap. It hurt far more than she had been expecting, and despite herself she attempted to wriggle free. The housekeeper's left arm only clamped her more tightly and she gave an indulgent little laugh. She understood why the new girl should feel impelled to wriggle. She was not angry at her instinctive rebellion, neither was she in the least sympathetic. It was all very matter-of-fact to her. The wooden spoon fell again and Lavinia yelped piteously. Her struggling continued, but weakly. She knew she could not escape that grip, and that it would probably be the worse for her if she did, but she felt some small relief in tensing her body against the unyielding strength of her tormentress.

The wooden spoon fell rapidly, again and again, until the air was filled with its harsh, echoing retort and Lavinia's cries. The mounting crescendo of pain was extraordinary. Just when Lavinia felt she could not bear another moment of such suffering, she was pushed roughly to her feet. As she arranged her skirts back to modesty, the housekeeper asked her a question that sounded from its tone mocking but not unfriendly. Lavinia made a non-committal noise in answer and the housekeeper laughed genially. Lavinia wondered what it would be like if she ever beat one in anger. She was ashamed of the indignity of the thing, ashamed of the noise she had made. Her face burned scarlet, but no one showed the smallest interest in her feelings. Leblanc was sent out of the room and returned with a dull grey dress. Lavinia removed her outer things and put on the drab, ill-fitting garment. She was given a large apron and set to scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees.

After a time she found herself left alone in the large kitchen, scrubbing the linoleum floor and surrounded by the immaculately-maintained cream 1950s gas stove, gas refrigerator and other appliances. She felt a certain comfort in the *realness* of the up-to-date objects. She felt crushed and subdued in her clumsy dress, kneeling at her menial task, her bottom and thighs still throbbing painfully from Mme. Fournier's vigorous, good-humoured application of the wooden spoon. There was something strangely comforting in her utter subjection, something tearfully warming in being the lowest of slaveys—not just playing at it, but really being it. But how long could that last? Would her feelings revolt against it in a few days or a few weeks? And what then? What could she do then but suffer and endure? She was trying to be realistic, but the feeling of being so utterly trapped could not seem wholly unpleasant to her. It was bitter-sweet, and whatever it was, it was not hollow: the sensations were strong and surging, deep and real, unlike the shabby, sub-standard emptiness of the Pit below.

Yet weeks, months, years, perhaps, of scrubbing floors:—would it

not become unutterably dreary? Not as hollow, of course, as the best that the Pit had to offer, but drab beyond anything outside that? What sort of a life had fate led her to? Her breast was too full of conflicting sensations, to make sense of anything at present.

The door opened and Leblanc came in quietly, making sure no one else was in the room. Each time one looked at her one was impressed anew by her immaculate black uniform, the dazzling white of her starched apron with its elaborate frilled shoulder-straps, and the exquisite, slightly animal prettiness of her small, feline, so-French face. Lavinia was struck anew by the profound force with which rank, reinforced by clothing, affects one. She had discovered it in school, reduced so fully and quickly to the status of a child, unquestionably junior, by virtue of her blue uniform, to a grey-clad senior who might be three or more years younger than herself—and now that she was but a humble slavey, ill-attired and with dirty hands. She found herself looking up to the trim parlourmaid, to whom she had, but an hour and a half ago, handed her suitcase, as belonging almost to a superior order of being.

Leblanc ordered her in to stand up, using a colloquial French expression that she found entirely mysterious. She looked up dumbly, like a puzzled animal. Impatiently, Leblanc motioned her to her feet and as Lavinia stood before her, took her shoulders and turned her roughly about to face the other way. Again, as when Mme. Fournier had seized her, Lavinia had the sensation of being a doll or marionette in the hands of another. The parlourmaid slipped her hand up the slavey's skirt from behind, running her sharp little fingernails teasingly up the back of her nylons. As she reached the stocking-tops and passed above them to the unprotected thigh, the slavey squealed, for her upper thighs were hot and sore and very tender from the beating she had so lately endured. The parlourmaid giggled attractively in her slightly animal way, and then, without warning, took a soft portion of the warm, reddened flesh between her finger and thumb and pinched viciously. Delacourt stifled a shriek and pulled away from the other girl.

Leblanc was clearly infuriated by this act of insubordination. She wheeled the slavey round by her shoulders to face her, fired a volley of tempestuous French at her and then, without warning, slapped her face so hard that she felt as if her head had been knocked from her shoulders. Instinctively, Delacourt's hands went up to protect her face, but Leblanc pulled them down again and put them by her sides, stroking them into place to indicate that she was to keep them there and offer no resistance. Then Leblanc made as if to slap her other cheek. Delacourt flinched, but the blow did not fall. The parlourmaid set her head gently straight again, stroked her arms, still obediently pinioned to her sides and fainted

again. This time Delacourt only blinked. The third time was a real slap which set her whole head ringing again; but Lavinia remained still with her hands at her sides. Leblanc smiled. She was learning.

More gently she turned her about by her shoulders again and placed the new girl's hands on her head. She worked her hand slowly up her skirt once more and pushed her legs slightly apart, causing her to adjust the position of her feet. Then, calmly and carefully, Leblanc subjected the new slavey to an expert series of cruel nips all over the puffed and tender flesh that had been thrashed by the housekeeper, venturing sometimes into the delicate area between her thighs. Lavinia stood quietly with her hands on her head, breathing sharply and even emitting tiny moans when the pain became intense, but no longer moving or offering the smallest resistance, although her physical stillness was maintained only at the cost of the most strenuous effort of will. At last the parlourmaid withdrew her leisurely hand, her sharp fingernails tracing deep runnels along her nylon-filmed legs, from the stocking-top to the back of her knee. Lavinia felt a shiver run over her whole body. Leblanc turned her by the shoulders once more, and facing her gave her a coquettish smile, and said, quite gently, "*Bien.*" Then she put her hands on her shoulders, pushed her roughly to her knees and indicated with a few disdainful words and a painful little kick from her small, neatly-shod foot, that the slavey must return to her menial labours and encroach no more upon the valuable time of her betters.

For the rest of the afternoon and late into the evening, Lavinia worked without ceasing: scrubbing, cleaning, washing up, fetching and carrying. Even at dinner she was not allowed to rest, being constantly told to get up and fetch something, usually in elaborate pantomime as she could not understand the French. Little Vasarde, who had been the lowliest maidservant until late this afternoon luxuriated in her uninterrupted meal, the first she had enjoyed since her arrival.

By the time she got to bed, Lavinia was exhausted. She slept between clean sheets in a tiny box-room shared with Vasarde. As she lay down, she found herself assailed by a terrible wave of desolation. Was it really only his morning that she had been safely at school? That she had awakened in her friendly little cubicle which had since become the scene of such defiling horror? Oh, would she never hear Susan's gentle, timid voice again, or feel protected by the reassuring, fair-minded English strictness of dear Miss Wellard? Was she henceforth to be but a plaything, tossed about by these harsh, unpredictable foreigners? And suddenly another, darker thought struck her. The whole thing was her fault really. Yes, it was. If only she had done the straight thing and reported Ella, this would not have happened. For Ella was responsible for

the newspaper article, she had little doubt of that. Ella had done it to get back at Miss Wellard and used Lavinia's name to get back at her. There was no proof, of course, but Lavinia was as sure of it as she could be of anything. Only Ella could be capable of such a thing, and only Ella had a fancied grudge against Lavinia. Oh, if only she had reported her for the initial cheating; put loyalty to the School and the Empire above a silly and meaningless loyalty to Ella, which was really only a form of moral cowardice. Where the war between good and evil was concerned the childish refusal to 'tell tales' could have no place. It was equivalent to a refusal to expose spies and saboteurs in one's own camp. Curiously, this last reflexion, painful as it was, helped Lavinia to feel more reconciled to her fate. She had not, after all, been the victim merely of an outrageous accident. She was suffering for her own fault. In a way it made things easier to bear—or at any rate easier to understand. But her aching heart could keep her awake no longer. She succumbed to the dark oblivion of physical exhaustion.

She had slept for perhaps five minutes when she became aware of a terrible clamour all about her. She was so very tired that she tried to ignore it, but then the whole world began to shake as if an earthquake were breaking about her, and on top of it all her ears were aching and her stomach hurt. She wondered whether some terrible disaster had occurred and she had been injured. Her eyes opened to find that all the noise was being made by one small girl—Vasarde by name. She was unleashing torrents of loud and incomprehensible French while kneeling on her stomach and shaking her violently by the ears. Bright, early-morning sunshine was streaming in through the tiny square window and Vasarde was already fully dressed in her crisp, black and white uniform. The night had passed in black, dreamless sleep and another day's labour was about to begin. Taking the tiny girl's assault for a piece of horseplay, Lavinia tried to rear her body so as to throw her off the bed. But the little maid-servant obviously took the matter very seriously. She spat strange words at Lavinia and slapped her roundly on the cheek. Her small hand was not as formidable as Leblanc's, but she slapped her again and again on each cheek alternatively, four, five, six times, each time admonishing her fiercely, as one speaks to an ill-controlled dog.

As soon as she was released, Lavinia, now thoroughly awake, got up hastily and put on her drab grey dress. Beside the other pin-neat, smartly-uniformed maids, she felt very much the Cinderella of the household. Before they left the room, Vasarde beckoned to her and slapped her face again. She was so small that she had to look up to Lavinia and lift her hand high to do it. Lavinia could easily have fended her off physically, but the little girl had the weight of the household behind her. She was

now the penultimate rather than the last in the pecking order, and she meant to enjoy her new-found rank to the full. She hissed some words explaining the reason for this chastisement. They meant nothing to Lavinia, and in any case they both knew that the real reason had nothing to do with any excuse Vasarde might have found.

As she went down the stairs to resume her duties, Lavinia wondered how she would get through the day. The previous day's exertions had knocked her up considerably; the night's rest had seemed as nothing, and she was beginning the day very tired—yet yesterday she had done considerably less than half a day's hard work. Today she was beginning from early morning.

Her fears were more than confirmed. The day proved utterly exhausting, as did the days that followed. Time passed in a fog of labour and flurry. When bedtime came she sank into oblivion the moment her head touched the pillow, only to be awakened almost immediately, it seemed, by Vasarde.

Before long she had half-forgotten that she had ever possessed a Christian name. She was always called Delacourt, or rather Delacoor'. She had never reflected before upon how French her name was, but the word rolled off the tongues of these French girls so very easily that it seemed strange now to think that she had ever considered it English. Not a word of English was ever spoken to her. All the household could speak at least a little, with the possible exception of Vasarde, but no one ever relieved her from her linguistic isolation by speaking so much of a sentence of her native tongue, even when she was in despair of understanding what was wanted of her. "Whip her hard enough and she'll know what you mean" seemed to be their philosophy, and on the whole it worked surprisingly well.

It was an odd life for Delacourt. In the past, wherever she had been, whatever people had thought of her, they had never denied that she was intelligent, but now it was very different. Lavinia was a very poor linguist with only a smattering of school French, and even that she could hardly recognise when it was not written down, but spoken aloud and at speed. The fast, colloquial French of this household might as well have been Arabic as far as she was concerned. Although her official position was that of a slavey, her actual position was in some ways closer to that of a dumb animal, who had to guess from the tone of voice what was being said to her. The household treated her, and regarded her, as something like an idiot-girl. She understood very little and had to be physically shown what she was to do. The words she used were few and simple and abominably pronounced.

It was a strange and humiliating form of isolation.

Chapter 10

The Life of a Slavey

DELACOURT WAS always tired. She did the heaviest and dirtiest jobs, was allowed no rest from morning to night, slapped unmercifully by Leblanc and Vasarde who would, at the smallest provocation, or just upon whim, report her to Mme. Fournier, who would thrash her with the wooden spoon or else make her bend over, holding her ankles while her heavy grey skirt and white cotton petticoat were thrown over her upper body like a tent and her exposed white thighs, above her coarse black stockings lashed with a martinet of seven leather tails. How Delacourt dreaded that martinet, and how the two girls loved to see her get it.

Delacourt rarely saw Mme. Gauvain and the shop assistant Alouette. They were far above her station, Occasionally Alouette had begun coming down the stairs as Delacourt was half-way up. The maidservant would hastily descend so that Alouette might have the stairs to herself and curtsy as she went by, but no word ever passed between them, and indeed, Alouette seemed not to notice the grey Cinderella who made way for her.

It was surprising and somewhat unnerving, then, when, a little over a fortnight after her arrival, Delacourt was summoned to see Alouette.

"Am I in trouble?" she had wanted to ask, when Leblanc conveyed the message to her, but she did not know the words. She merely gave the parlourmaid an anxious, appealing look, and received in return an unconcerned shrug.

She knocked on the door to which she had been directed and was bidden enter. Alouette looked at her carefully for a little while and looked at the paper on which she had written her measurements the first time they had met. This recognition of Delacourt's previous incarnation did not trouble Alouette in the least. It had no connexion with the present condition of affairs.

"*Delacourt, ne c'est pas ?*" she asked, as if by way of making the position clear.

"*Oui, Mademoiselle.*"

Alouette looked again at the paper and made a few more measurements before dismissing Delacourt.

A few days later, Delacourt was fitted with a proper uniform. She had two lovely black dresses, three crisp white aprons with bib fronts and shoulder straps, much plainer, of course, than Leblanc's, but similar to Vasarde's, two plain white caps without streamers, six pairs of very plain, very thin, white cotton knickers, elasticated at the legs and waist, two white nylon full-slips, two white girdles with wide white suspenders and metal clips, two plain white brassières and six pairs of dark, serviceable 1950s nylons, heavier than the ones she had come in, but much more sheer than the black things she had been wearing so far.

As she left the room dressed in her new uniform she felt that it was one of the proudest moments of her life. Little Vasarde kissed her on both cheeks. It transpired, however, that she was not to give up her grey Cinderella dress completely. She would wear it in the mornings for scrubbing, washing and kitchen work, but when she was in the front of the house—cleaning the stairs or performing chambermaid's duties, she would wear her 'dress' uniform. It was, in fact, only with her arrival that Vasarde had been allowed to leave off the hateful grey of the slavey and wear her black and white uniform all day.

Nonetheless, the attainment of a real uniform did mark something of a transition in Delacourt's life. She was henceforth somewhat more accepted; regarded, perhaps, more as the idiot of the family than an unwelcome foreign idiot. Her mistakes became running jokes among the servants, and gradually she began to pick up enough French to be more like a lisping infant than a dumb animal. This did not, however, mean that her beatings grew less frequent. Leblanc beat both her and Vasarde frequently. Mme. Fournier beat all three of them. Vasarde slapped her, shook her and otherwise tormented her, as the fancy took her—because Delacourt had committed some fault or because she herself had been beaten unjustly by Leblanc and wanted to take it out on some one, or just to exercise her power.

Vasarde was an ungainly creature; by no means pretty like Leblanc. She was in her mid-to-late teens and usually had two or more livid spots on her face. She was too thin, her hair was lank, she was full of vitality, which occasionally took on friendly forms, but more often expressed itself toward Delacourt in the form of bullying of one sort or another. She did not feel herself in a position formally to whip her, but she slapped her, shook her and pulled her hair freely. Delacourt suffered a peculiarly helpless feeling being manhandled by a girl so very much smaller and weaker than herself, but she had no choice but to accept whatever treatment tiny Vasarde handed out to her. It was this aspect

of the situation that delighted Vasarde most of all. When Leblanc pinched one or beat one with blatant unfairness, there was always about it a warmth and sensuality. One could almost feel rewarded for one's sufferings by the dimpling of pleasure on her sharp, pretty face. Vasarde's bullyings—one could not but think of them as that—were cold and crabbed. She tried to be imperious but only seemed depressingly heartless.

Sometimes she treated Delacourt as her lady's maid, sitting on her bed while the slavey carefully put on her stockings for her, unrolling them from the foot to the thigh and carefully fastening her wide white suspenders, allowing the strong, no-nonsense elastic to pull the nylon tightly upwards in taut peaks. If Delacourt was in the least ungainly in the operation, her face would be slapped hard. Perhaps Vasarde thought she was being seductive with her pale, spindly little thighs and the glimpses she afforded of her thin white knickers with wisps of her plentiful, wiry, mouse-coloured hair escaping at the crotch. Often Delacourt inwardly hated her, but in certain moods—perhaps twice out of the seven times a week when she performed this office—she did feel a strange stirring of hot, perverse attraction for the beastly girl, which stayed with her for the rest of the day, like a pervasive aroma of tingling animal enchantment. Oddly, this only seemed to increase her dislike for her the rest of the time.

One day when Delacourt was sweeping the stairs with a dustpan and brush, Vasarde motioned to her to give her the dustpan. Delacourt obeyed, and her superior examined the contents and then, with a single sweeping gesture threw them back over the stairs. She said something amusing which Delacourt could not follow and turned away with an unpleasant little giggle. For once, Delacourt was unable to contain herself. She seized the diminutive maid by the shoulders and looked as if she was about to do her some grievous violence. Vasarde, to give her her due, was surprisingly unafraid of the much bigger girl. She shouted shrill orders in French which, incomprehensible as they were, brought Delacourt back to the sense of her position. She slapped her and commanded her to go to their room.

Delacourt went into the back of the house and up the back stairs to sit on her bed. She looked about the tiny, bare room, hardly large enough for the two small beds, wondering what would happen next. She did not have long to wait. Vasarde came in with a thick, flexible switch of willow she had cut from the back garden. She commanded Delacourt to remove her apron, her dress and her slip, then stood for a moment enjoying her vulnerability as she stood before her in her underwear. Suddenly she flung her face down on the bed and began to

thrash her. It was a beating unlike anything Delacourt had experienced before. The fresh, green switch, heavy with sap, lashed agonisingly across her upper thighs again and again, then she felt it across her bare shoulders. Vasarde was shouting, working herself into a frenzy. The strokes fell furiously on every part of her. She could only cling tight to the bed to protect her front.

Suddenly there was a loud knock on the door and Leblanc entered. Her voice was questioning. Vasarde's reply was brief and forceful. Lavinia guessed that she told the parlourmaid that the slavey had attacked her without mentioning the initial provocation—not that that would, in all probability, have made any difference to Leblanc's attitude. She gave Vasarde permission to carry on and left the room to tell Mme. Fournier that there was no cause for concern. Thus encouraged, Vasarde redoubled her efforts until Delacourt was covered in ugly weals and bruises from her shoulders to the backs of her knees—fortunately her girdle gave some protection to her lower back, the more since Vasarde aimed her blows at unprotected flesh.

Finally Delacourt was permitted to dress and return to clean up the mess on the front stairs, although she felt too stiff, sore and shaken to move at all. It was a week or more before the effects of that thrashing began to clear, and a few marks were with her for months.

The next day Vasarde once more came upon Delacourt sweeping the stairs. She took the dustpan and with a little laugh threw its contents back over the stairs, taking care to sprinkle them liberally and flicking the last powdery residue of dirt over the front of Delacourt's uniform. She looked Delacourt in the eyes, as if to say "What will you do this time?" Delacourt said meekly, "*Merci, Mademoiselle,*" and proceeded to sweep the stairs again.

From this time forward, Vasarde liked to reiterate the lesson every now and again. When Delacourt was scrubbing the floor she might kick over her bucket of dirty water or tread heavily and deliberately on her hands with her shiny, solid little black lace-ups that Delacourt polished every day. Delacourt would keep her eyes to the floor, quietly acquiescing in whatever indignity the little maid chose to subject her to. That was what made it so amusing. Often these little attentions were passed off as "accidents", but sometimes, as when Vasarde found Delacourt mending and tore open the seam she was working on so that she would have to begin again, the incident was too deliberate to be ignored with down-cast eyes, and the slavey must thank her superior.

Just occasionally Vasarde would do something more daring. When Delacourt was washing up, Vasarde might pick up a plate, examine it, and, calmly opening her hand, let it fall to the floor, and then report

the slavey for her carelessness. She would give Delacourt a sly, cold little grin as she bent over and grasped her ankles to await the harsh lashes of the martinet.

This last little kindness was fortunately very rare, for Vasarde knew that if she was ever caught deliberately breaking plates she would be thrashed without pity. Vasarde, in fact was whipped quite frequently, and it was one of Delacourt's greatest pleasures to see the dark lashes of the martinet fall across her spindly white thighs, producing weals so dark and raised that one could see them not only on the bare skin above the stockings, but even through the thin material of her white uniform knickers. The thin, high squeals of Vasarde under the lash were music to Delacourt's ears, even though she knew that Vasarde would almost certainly relieve her feelings by making her suffer in some way shortly afterwards.

Even the less drastic attentions, such as tearing open Delacourt's mending, were not as frequent as they might have been, since although tormenting the slavey was not a notable crime, impeding the work of the household was. Consequently, whenever Vasarde took Delacourt's mending from her hands to examine it or selected a plate from the drying rack, or let her little polished shoe rest on the rim of her bucket, or hovered close to any other of the dozen little tricks that she had invented for the slavey's delight, Delacourt's temples grew cold and her pulses raced in a mixture of fear, helpless anger, and a strange, unaccountable quietness and warmth of submission, not knowing what to expect. Indeed, the constraints upon Vasarde's actions actually made them more effective by compelling her to behave in practice with a greater subtlety than her nature really possessed.

The persecution to which Vasarde subjected her provided a counterpoint to a gradual but noticeable rise in Delacourt's status. With her new uniform she was allowed to work more often in the front of the house at jobs that were too menial for Leblanc. Maids in the front of a house should be decorative as well as useful and a crisply-uniformed Delacourt was certainly more presentable than Vasarde. She was allowed out occasionally to post letters or to get a little shopping. This was hardly a privilege, as going down into the Pit was a dirty job, given to the lowest servants, but at least it bespoke a measure of trust and gave Delacourt a certain sense of freedom. She enjoyed being seen by the natives in her smart uniform, partly because she knew she looked attractive and partly because it was an uncompromising statement of everything that their world did not believe in.

Very occasionally, after a time, she found herself called upon to help in the shop. Leblanc, of course, would have been the natural choice, but

her English was very poor; besides, as parlourmaid it was her duty and privilege to open the door to all comers. Mme. Gauvain thought it a shade *infra dig.* to have the same maid serving in the shop who had opened the door. Vasarde knew about as much English as Delacourt knew French—less, in fact, as Delacourt was slowly and painfully beginning to grow accustomed to the language—and she was hardly an adornment to the establishment. Delacourt, on the other hand was pretty and charming and her English impeccable—far better than that of most English girls.

Mme. Gauvain did not require much help in the shop. Alouette was usually sufficient, but occasionally Delacourt was called upon. Her new meekness and deference added to the poise she had acquired at P——House School made her the most delightful of assistants. Occasionally *clientes* surreptitiously tipped her on the way out and Delacourt was intrigued to note that the money they gave her was usually a sixpence or a threepenny piece (once a whole shilling) rather than decimalised bongo-money. She had led such a curious and secluded life since her induction into the Empire that while she was in many respect very experienced in Imperial ways, there were numerous elementary aspects of Imperial life of which she was completely ignorant.

On one occasion two very smartly dressed women in the severely-tailored style of the 1940s came into the shop. Delacourt felt the psychic temperature drop. Mme. Gauvain seemed not to relish their presence. They had clearly not come to buy, and after passing the time of day in a rather stiff and formal—one might almost have said official—manner, the one who did the talking (for only one of them spoke) said:

"I believe, madam, that you have made the acquaintance of one Lavinia Delacourt."

"That is so," replied Mme. Gauvain.

"Have you, by any chance, seen her in the last two months?"

"No," said Mme. Gauvain, "should I have?"

"Not particularly, madam. Just a routine enquiry."

Delacourt had been in the stock room during this interchange. She had seen the visitors but did not think they had seen her. She hid herself behind the door of the stock room, heard the shop door close behind them; then she rushed out, speaking English in her agitation, Mme. Gauvain did not seem to notice.

"They were asking about me, weren't they?"

"Yes."

"Who were they?"

Mme. Gauvain hissed the terse phrase "*Les flics.*"

"The police? But they looked like Imperials."

"Yes. Imperial *flics*."

"Why were they asking about me?"

"To find out if you 'ave sneaked back into the Empire after you were thrown out, I imagine."

"Please, madame, don't give me away."

Mme. Gauvain looked at her disdainfully for a few moments and then turned back to her work. Delacourt felt that the disdain was as much for the *flics* as for her. She did not think her mistress would give her away.

Chapter 11

The Ingénue in the Garden

AS TIME PASSED, Delacourt became increasingly acclimatised to her situation. The work, though still exhausting, she began to take in her stride ; the language she was coming to understand—sometimes better than she pretended, for she found that she was rather fond of her infantile *persona* and sometimes made absurd mistakes on purpose for the amusement of the household ; not that she was in any grave danger of becoming excessively proficient. The recognition accorded to her in allowing her to assist occasionally in the shop earned her the envy of Vasarde. By way of conciliation she gave Vasarde most of the tips she received—she did not know where or how to spend them in any case, while Vasarde clearly valued them—but she was by no means wholly appeased by these offerings, and her persecutions increased whenever Delacourt returned after spending any length of time in the “upper world” of the shop.

Oddly, Delacourt minded this far less than she might have expected to. She enjoyed serving in the shop ; it made a welcome break from her usual duties and she liked breathing the air of a more delicate and civilised world than that of the servants’ quarters. Nonetheless, she discovered that the very abjectness of her position at the absolute bottom had grown curiously dear to her. Her feelings were to say the least ambiguous. In one way she despised Vasarde, looked upon Leblanc and Mme. Fournier as very much her natural inferiors—as, indeed, they were—hated the rough, uncultivated atmosphere of the servants’ domain and longed for gentler, more sensitive, more intelligent company. In another way, she found it strangely attractive, looked up to every one—even Vasarde—and felt it somehow exposed and a little cold and frightening to mix with people of her own level, even as a servant. After an afternoon in the gentle air in the shop, an extra dose of humiliation and abuse from Vasarde seemed to redress the balance and restore her to her accustomed and proper Cinderella position. Sometimes she hardly felt herself until her face had been slapped or her ears pinched or half an hour’s work wantonly spoiled. As she scrubbed floors or brushed carpets, Delacourt sometimes wondered at these matters and mused upon

how mysterious to herself were many of the secrets of her own heart.

Another secret which had intrigued her since her arrival was that of the upper part of the house. Into this she had never been allowed, and indeed, no one seemed to occupy it, although that was where the apartments must lie in which she had seen the girl and the formidable-looking woman in black on her first visit.

One night, quite late, she heard strange female voices—English, she thought—and the moving of heavy objects. She fancied she heard at one point a child's voice, subdued, polite and also English. She went to bed wondering about the incident, and the next morning, from the servants' conversation, she discovered something about it. The servants were wont to converse freely in front of her in the belief that she understood nothing of what they said. This was no longer entirely true, but for her own reasons—reasons which she herself hardly understood—she had concealed from the others the extent of her small progress in the language, preferring largely to retain the half-cursed, half-charmed position of idiot-girl. Indeed she was only partly conscious of the extent to which she concealed her understanding, pretending, even to herself, to be somewhat slower and stupider than she was. In any case, the rather earth-bound conversation of the kitchen, with its gossip and banter rarely interested her and she preferred to leave it in a semi-deliberate fog of incomprehension, rather as a small child will often shut herself off to dull adult conversation. It was all part of her strange ambiguity which at once looked down upon the other servants and at the same time placed them on a higher, more adult, plane than herself. Nevertheless, when matters were discussed which she found of interest, she discovered that she could understand something approaching half of what was being said, and this was the case today.

It appeared that the people who lived in the upper part of the house had been away for some time. They were English and there was an adolescent girl of their party. This was as much as Delacourt could gather, but it was enough to set her imagination afire. The fascinating girl whom she had seen in the window had returned to the house. Who was she? What was her secret? For Delacourt was convinced that she *had* a secret and equally convinced that this was the same girl who had returned to the house. At times the sceptical part of her consciousness tried to pour cold water on her romantic certainties, but it had very small success. Delacourt *knew*—and within a very short space of time she was proved correct.

Among the domestic talents which Delacourt was discovered to possess during her life as a maidservant was one for arranging flowers. She made the most enchanting settings for the shop and for her mistress's

dinner table, and was permitted to go into the garden to pick flowers for her arrangements. It was on one of these forays that she rounded a tall bed of raspberry plants supported by canes and found herself face to face with the girl who had for so long haunted her imagination. She was a thin, lanky child—much taller (though Delacourt could not know this) than she had been when their eyes had first met. In point of fact she had been subject, over the last month or so, to one of those sudden adolescent bursts of upward growth that leave a girl disproportionately tall and somewhat frail; a circumstance which added considerably to the waif-like appearance which she had always presented. She was perhaps fifteen or sixteen, lemon-fair and very pale, with large, haunting blue eyes that shone like pale sapphires in a pale-gold setting.

Delacourt was considerably abashed. She wanted to speak to the girl before the fleeting opportunity passed: but what could she say? At any time it would have been difficult, but now she was no longer on a level with this child. She was a mere maidservant; and one moreover of the very lowest rank. Apart from all considerations of discipline, her innate sense of propriety put up the strongest of barriers against addressing her superior. She was aware even now that she had been staring at the girl in a manner that, in a maidservant, could only appear stupid and insolent. Blushing hotly with both embarrassment and disappointment, she turned away, when suddenly the girl herself took the initiative.

"Good morning," she said. She said it in a confident, patrician tone which firmly recalled the servant-girl from her incipient retreat. There was an element of command upon the surface of her tone, and beneath that surface an element of entreaty. Delacourt's soul was touched and excited by both.

"Good morning, miss," she replied.

"I believe I have seen you before." Her voice was very English, very poised. Her vowels as perfectly-formed as Delacourt's own; yet somehow one sensed that her nerves were shattered—not by any immediate event, but as a chronic condition. She was proud, but highly-strung, her sensibility stretched out thin and taut, like that of a thoroughbred mare subjected to harsh handling.

"Yes, miss."

"Some time ago, was it not? You were not a serving-girl then."

"No, miss."

"You don't seem like a servant to me. Are you on Punitive Service?"

The uniformed girl's round eyes grew rounder still. It was obvious that she did not know what Punitive Service was.

"No, miss."

"Say: 'The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain'."

"The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain, miss."

"You're not really a maid, are you?"

Delacourt said nothing.

"Well, *are* you really a maidservant?"

"With all respect, miss, and with every apology for contradicting you : I am."

"An actual maid who expects to be a maid all her life?"

"I can foresee no other future, miss."

"Then I am convinced that some curious adventure or remarkable circumstance has led you to your present position."

"That is true, miss."

There was a rustle among the leaves and the girl looked about her anxiously. It was only a cat pushing its way through the raspberry canes, but she continued her conversation with the unusual maidservant in an undertone.

"Do you know, I have thought of you often since that day I first saw you. You made an impression on me somehow. You fascinated me."

Delacourt became excited. "Yes, it was just the same with me, miss. I can't count the number of times I have seen your face in my mind's eye, and that woman in black standing behind you."

Rachel shivered at the mention of Miss Millington even though she was a part of her daily life. "We must be kindred souls," she said.

"Yes, miss. I believe we are." For a moment Delacourt thought the girl was going to tell her to stop calling her 'miss'. She was relieved when she did not. She wanted to be friends, but she found that she had no wish to act in a manner unsuited to her position.

"What is your name, girl?" The affectionately patronising 'girl' seemed almost a reply to Delacourt's unspoken thoughts.

"Delacourt, miss." From force of habit she pronounced it in the French manner.

"Are you French?" asked Rachel in momentary wonder at the notion of a foreigner's speaking such impeccable English and at the notion of so remarkable a linguist languishing as a slavey.

"No, miss, I am not French."

"But you work for the Froggies?"

Delacourt repressed a giggle severely.

"I am sorry, Delacourt. I should not make fun of your mistresses. You may pinch me." The maidservant rightly interpreted this as a command to perform the service of disciplining the young lady. Following the practice which the parlourmaid had often employed upon her, she slipped her hand up Rachel's skirt and, running her hand up the back of her leg, nipped the soft flesh above her stocking-top sharply between

forefinger and thumb. To her surprise the young lady gasped in such agitation that she judged the gasp would have been a scream had not her fear of discovery suppressed it.

"Oh, please—not there!" she whispered urgently.

Delacourt lowered her eyes and folded her hands before her in the attitude of a maid accepting a reprimand. "I am very sorry, miss."

"Not at all, Delacourt. I am sorry. If I order you to discipline me I should accept it without fuss. Pinch me again. Harder."

Once again Delacourt slipped her hand up the girl's long, thin leg passing the slightly thicker welt of the stocking-top, she noted this time that the flesh that swelled above it was warm and perhaps a little puffy. She felt a raised weal more severe than anything she had borne on her own thighs except for the time that Vasarde had abandoned all restraint in thrashing her on the bed. No wonder the girl had reacted so violently to the last pinch. She must have caught her on one of her sore places. How brave she was to ask for it again. Delacourt wanted to pinch her more gently this time, but that was directly contrary to her orders. She clenched her teeth and pinched hard. The girl closed her eyes and drew in her breath but said nothing. Delacourt noticed that she looked a little paler even than usual.

"Thank you, Delacourt. My name, by the way, is Rachel. I wish to see you again. Can we arrange it?"

"It is rather difficult, Miss Rachel. My duties occupy my every waking moment and I am usually supervised. My time is not my own and I could hardly undertake to keep an assignation, though I should certainly try."

"Very well, Delacourt. I shall be here at eleven o'clock every morning and at two o'clock every afternoon for half an hour. If you ever can contrive to get here at those times, please do so. I shall also keep an eye open for when you come into the garden and will try to come and meet you if I am free. It would help if you could make some sound that might call my attention."

"Very good, Miss Rachel, I shall try."

"Oh, and one more thing, Delacourt."

"Yes, miss?"

"Are you the slavey of the establishment?" "Slavey" in the Empire was not merely a colloquialism, but a precise term indicating a maidservant of the lowest level.

"Yes, miss."

"What has happened to the old slavey—the little spotty girl."

"She is still here, miss."

"I see." Miss Rachel seemed to be concealing some reaction to this

information, though Delacourt could not tell what it was. "That will be all, Delacourt."

"Very good, miss."

Meeting Miss Rachel was by no means easy, but Delacourt found that it could be contrived at last once, sometimes twice a week ; and with these encounters the girls became close friends. Neither had another soul whom she could call 'friend', and each found that the other answered to something deep within herself. Delacourt's initial impression that Miss Rachel's nerves were in a pitiable condition was increasingly confirmed by each meeting. While her outward *miroir* was admirably poised, she jumped at sounds, her eyes were often distant and troubled, and once, when she presented Delacourt with a flower she had picked, the stem shook noticeably in a hand she could not prevent from trembling. The maidservant steadied the hand in her own and gave the young lady the most reassuring of looks. She wanted to say "Don't worry, miss. I'll look after you." But what could a poor slavey do for her, or any one, after all ? Miss Rachel cast her eyes down. The reassurance was welcome, but she was trapped in a nightmare and the kind little maidservant could not help her. Then she looked at Delacourt again. She did not wish to seem to snub her. She smiled warmly, but Delacourt saw that there were tears in her eyes.

The nature of Miss Rachel's perturbation remained mysterious for some time. Her nervousness, her starting at sounds, could be partly explained by the fact that she was certainly afraid of being discovered with her new friend—afraid, no doubt, of severe chastisement for them both, and more afraid lest this crumb of companionship should be snatched from her life—but there was more to it than that. Her anxiety was an ingrained condition, although Delacourt felt sure it was not innate. It was as if her nervous constitution were being systematically wrecked. Miss Rachel gave few clues as to what might be the matter, as if she had been afraid or ashamed to say anything, or as if she had not been quite ready to trust her new companion. And then, one day, everything came out in a rush, although the circumstances leading up to the revelation concerned not Miss Rachel but Delacourt herself.

Mme. Gauvain had told Delacourt the first time she helped in the shop that if there was the slightest complaint against her by a *cliente*, just or unjust, she would suffer for it. For some time there were no complaints, for Delacourt's blend of attractive intelligence and utter subservience was entirely delightful. On one fateful afternoon, however a woman in her early forties entered the shop, She was of that vinegary, unpleasable

temperament that shop-girls everywhere dread. It happened that Mme. Gauvain was engaged with an important *cliente* and could not attend immediately to the new arrival.

"I am afraid Mme. Gauvain is occupied at present. If madam would care to wait just a few minutes——." Delacourt remembered the occasion on which Alouette had said something similar to herself, and how nervous she had looked in case she, Delacourt, had expressed some displeasure at the request. How strange that seemed now.

"No, I do not care to wait," returned the woman. "I will do so since I appear to have no choice, but the prospect does not please me, and neither does your manner, my girl."

At that moment Mme. Gauvain appeared.

"Is there some trouble, madame?"

"Yes there is. I am not accustomed to being kept waiting, and I am not accustomed to being told to wait in an insolent manner by a jumped-up snip of a slavey."

"I shall be with you in but the few moments, madame, I assure. As for the girl, she shall be soundly thrashed."

"I am glad to hear it,"

When the shop was empty, Mme. Gauvain turned to Delacourt.

"Well, were you insolent to Miss Tremayne?" she asked, in French.

"Madame, I truly do not think so."

"Good. I believe you. Bend over the counter."

Mme. Gauvain positioned Delacourt over the counter she had suffered upon once before. This time, however, rather than the odd, strained position she had been compelled to take up, she was placed end-on to the counter with her upper body resting fully upon it and her legs extending backward at an angle. Mme. Gauvain knew that she would require full support during the thrashing she was about to receive. She went to a small cupboard and took out a martinet. It was thinner and lighter than the heavy one used in the kitchen, the handle of beautifully turned and polished ebony and the thong made up of many supple, slender leather strands.

Alouette was called to lift up Delacourt's skirt and white nylon slip, which she did with great satisfaction, appreciating the vulnerability of the maidservant's well-rounded thighs and of the swelling cheeks beneath the thin, white cotton uniform knickers which would afford such scant protection from the lash.

Without another word, Mme. Gauvain swung the martinet. The multiple lashes cut the air with a mezzo *whishing* chord and licked about the maidservant's delicate rump in a firm, businesslike manner. Delacourt gasped. The pain was not as harsh and cutting as that of Mme.

Fournier's unsubtle whip, but it had a higher pitch which made one draw in the breath. Alouette watched the gentle wobble of the maid's creamy flesh. She saw the first criss-cross of lash-marks darken to a pink glow, imagined the pain she herself had so often felt, and was glad. The interloper should enjoy *all* aspects of her privileged position.

Again and again the martinet fell, Mme. Gauvain plying it with artistic skill, now broadly across the bottom, now on the thighs, now primarily on one cheek. She varied the angles of the strokes cleverly, some of them even cutting upwards, in between the legs. The speed and skill of the whipping was quite unlike the solid, heavy kitchen-whippings of six to a dozen strokes. The pain began at an intensity somewhat below that caused by the heavy martinet, but mounted and accumulated to a furious concentration.

Suddenly, abruptly Mme. Gauvain stopped. Delacourt lay weak and tremulous : relieved, but also surprised, as if a dance had been broken off in mid-step. Her mistress spoke in a normal conversational tone, quite as if her maidservant had been standing before her in a more ordinary position. She spoke slowly and clearly in the simple French which the Slavey was now known to understand.

"As I have said, Delacourt. I believe you that you were not insolent to my customer. Had you been so, your punishment would be great indeed. However this is my inflexible rule : if any customer makes any complaint about any of my girls, rightly or wrongly, fairly or unfairly, reasonably or unreasonably, that girl suffers for it. Do you understand?"

"*Oui, madame,*" said Delacourt. She had understood most of it.

Alouette looked at the livid dark-pink thighs against which the wide, white suspenders now stood out so starkly virginal and hoped cruelly that her mistress had not finished with the slavey.

Her wish was granted. The lash sang through the air again and Delacourt cried out in surprised pain. With renewed vigour her mistress rained the subtle, insistent lashes upon the serving-girl's sore skin. In distress, and almost involuntarily, she half-stood up.

"Hold her, Alouette," commanded Mme Gauvain. Enthusiastically the French girl pushed her upper body back against the thick glass counter-top and twisted her arms forcefully behind her back. Delacourt cried out and then went limp beneath Alouette's grip. It was her ingrained habit by now to submit herself unresistingly to rough handling.

As the artistic thrashing continued, building the pain to a swelling crescendo, Delacourt whimpered helplessly, like a small animal. Slowly the whipping decreased in force and rhythm until it had almost tailed off to nothing. Then, with six lashes spaced at ten-second intervals, and so hard that Alouette felt them vibrate through her own body, Mme

Gauvain concluded the punishment. Before she knew it, Delacourt was on her feet again, neat and trim in black and white, thanking her mistress for her ministrations and proceeding giddily back to the kitchen. The pain was still singing through her body, but in a curious way she felt she had received something of which she had stood in need.

Nevertheless, the thought of repeating the experience made her turn cold, and there was something terrible in the knowledge that any customer, at any time, with or without reason, maliciously or quite innocently, could, with a single word, condemn her to another such thrashing.

Leblanc was in the kitchen and quickly gathered what had happened. She could not resist bestowing a few excruciating pinches upon the slavey's burning flesh, for she found something exhilarating in the moist heat of freshly-whipped thighs and the squirmy sensitivity of freshly-whipped maidservants, but then—for she was really a warm-hearted girl—she sent Delacourt to gather some herbs from the kitchen garden, a job she rather enjoyed herself, but she felt a little fresh air and quiet would do the child good.

Rachel was watching from her window. She often watched on the off-chance of seeing her friend come into the garden, positioning her writing-desk so that she could look out every few minutes as she worked on her demanding and often tedious schoolwork or her long impositions. She received only a few hours' schooling a day, but had to work hard for most of the rest of the time if she wished to avoid the sort of punishment that turned her heart cold. However, since she worked mostly unsupervised, she was free much of the time to slip out for a quarter of an hour at her own will. Rarely enough were her vigils rewarded, but to-day she saw the serving-girl leave the house in her crisp black and white uniform, looking so neat and pretty, so friendly and reassuring.

Rachel managed to slip down the stairs, out of the door (her part of the house had its own entrance) and into the garden, and to intercept Delacourt behind the raspberry canes. Seeing her close to, she realised that the maid was not her usual bright untroubled self. Delacourt was settled in reasonably happily, if somewhat lonelinessily, now and she made it her business always to present a comforting face to her friend, whom she felt was in need of it. Today, however, she was too shaken by her recent whipping to wear the mask.

Miss Rachel, so reserved in relation to her own troubles, was immediately moved to emotion by any sign of suffering on the part of her friend.

"Delacourt, what is it?" she asked solicitously. "You look terrible."

"It's nothing really, miss," said Delacourt, trying to laugh. "I've just

been whipped. I expect you've seen a thrashed maid before ; it happens often enough."

Miss Rachel took her hands. "Was it dreadful, Delacourt?"

"Quite a thorough one as whippings go. You can see if you like."

"Really, Delacourt," said Miss Rachel taken aback. "Do you think that would be proper?"

"We always used to do it at school," said the maidservant, "when a girl was sent for the cane, or strapped by Miss Carshalton, her friends would gather round afterwards and as often as not she would lift her skirts and 'show them the traces' as we used to say."

"Very well, Delacourt, you may show me your 'traces'."

"Very good, miss." Delacourt hitched up her skirt at the back until the edging of her white knickers was just visible. Miss Rachel touched the inflamed skin with her cool, long hand—her hands seemed always cold, even on the hottest day—"Poor Delacourt," she said gently.

Delacourt knew that she must be quite a sight, and like any school-girl under such circumstances, her mild self-pity was replaced by a touch of pride. In any case it struck her that Miss Rachel was probably somewhat horrified and felt it best to make light of the matter.

"Rather good, isn't it, miss?" she said.

"Not bad," said Miss Rachel rather complacently. The reply, together with its tone, rather shocked Delacourt.

"It was a jolly good thrashing, I can tell you, miss," she said.

"I've got better traces than that, and they're three days old," said the girl. She was wearing a light-blue summer frock in an authentic 1950s pattern with a wide skirt. Without warning she began to gather up her skirts and her layers of net petticoat to show her own traces. She was wearing the palest of 1950s stockings with a thin seam up the back—the sort that have an oval hole in the inner layer of the welt at the top, just above where the seam ends. Delacourt remembered noticing these things, for every irrelevant detail was impressed upon her memory by the shock of what was revealed. Miss Rachel's thighs were covered with deep, ugly black-and-purple bruises. In places one could see the trace of a long implement like a cane or switch, but mostly the bruising was so dense that the whole area was a patchwork of deep discolouration with a few scabs where the skin had been broken.

"This is monstrous!" breathed Delacourt.

"Just a whipped girl," said Miss Rachel. "It happens often enough."

"No, miss. This is not ordinary punishment. I have seen enough of that and I have nothing against it. This is something quite different. What did you do to deserve this?"

"Nothing in particular. It was a Session."

"What is a Session, if I may ask, miss?"

"A Session is when my guardian, Miss Millington, invites a number of people to see me being whipped. If I have done something I am whipped for that, but if not, I am whipped anyway because I am bad."

Delacourt felt her anger mounting, together with a sudden questioning of the entire world to which she had given her life.

"Who are these people who come? Are they Imperials?"

"They dress a bit like Imperials, but I don't think they are."

"How can you tell?"

"Well, for one thing I have seen them pay money, and it wasn't Imperial money, it was bongo-money."

"Money! How much money?"

"Delacourt, you are forgetting your place."

"I am sorry, miss. May I ask how much money, miss?"

"Well, the only time I overheard it was a thousand pounds—but then I know bongo-money isn't worth much."

"A thousand pounds is worth a certain amount even in bongo-money. One of their pounds is worth a shilling, miss, so a thousand pounds is a thousand shillings—that's fifty pounds, miss."

"Fifty pounds! They were paying all that?"

"So it would appear, miss. May I make so bold as to enquire who it is that whips you on these occasions? Is it your guardian?"

"Sometimes, and sometimes it is one of the outsiders; but often it is one of the girls from your household."

"Which one, miss?"

"I don't know her name. The little spotty one. The one that used to be the slavey before you came."

"You mean Vasarde, miss."

"Yes—yes, that name rings a bell now you say it."

"The little brute! I'll scratch her spotty little eyes out."

"Delacourt! Don't be such an idiot. If you start doing foolish things and getting yourself into trouble on my account I'll—I'll never speak to you again. I mean it." Tears were starting in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, miss. I was speaking out of turn. It won't happen again, miss—promise."

Despite herself, Miss Rachel smiled at Delacourt's 'servanty' turns of phrase. "Good girl," she said.

"One more thing, miss. Do you think Mme. Gauvain knows what is going on?"

"No, I don't think so. Not judging by the way they sneak Vasarde in and out."

"Perhaps I should talk to Mme. Gauvain, miss."

"Don't be silly, Delacourt. She can't stop my guardian having me disciplined. Now please don't do anything which might give away the fact that I've been talking to you. I can stand a bit of punishment. I deserve it anyway. But I *need* to be friends with you, Delacourt. *Promise* you won't spoil it."

"I promise, miss."

Deeply shocked as she was, life went on as normal for Delacourt. There was nothing she could do for Miss Rachel, and while the child's nerves were in a frightful state, she knew that her friendship was making life better for her.

Over the next week, Delacourt had two unexpected encounters while working in the shop. The first was with Ella from school. She came in one day out of uniform (the Summer Holidays were now well advanced) and looking very grown-up, even rather vamp-ish. Delacourt served her exactly as she served every other *cliente*. Neither showed the smallest recognition of the other, but as she left, Ella said to Mme. Gauvain:

"That serving-girl has been looking at me in an insolent way."

"She shall be soundly thrashed, I assure, mademoiselle" said Mme. Gauvain.

"Good. She looks as if she needs it."

Delacourt said nothing about knowing Ella, but, to Alouette's delight, suffered a whipping even more severe than the previous one.

The second encounter was hardly an encounter at all. Lady Chelverton came into the shop just as Delacourt was running an errand. Delacourt stood back to let her enter and then left the room. She gave no sign of recognising the uniformed maidservant—but then ladies rarely take much notice of other people's maids. When Delacourt returned, she was gone.

"Was that Lady Chelverton, madame?" asked Delacourt disingenuously in French.

"It was," said Mme. Gauvain. "How did you know?" She had no recollection that Lady Chelverton had been there at the same time as Delacourt's first visit.

"I met her once, madame"

"Did she recognise you?"

"I don't think so, madame. Anyway she is a friend."

"Don't let her recognise you, *ma petite*. She is dangerous."

"Lady Chelverton dangerous, madame?" said Delacourt astonished.

Mme. Gauvain did not deign to reply.

Chapter 12

The Raid

MME. GAUVAIN's remarks frightened Delacourt. What sort of danger could Lady Chelverton represent? *Had* she recognised her? Her heart was full of nameless troubles. Above all she did not want to be caught and made to leave this house; now more than ever. Not only did she know that she could not live in the Pit, but she knew also that Miss Rachel needed her.

She had occasion to leave the house at dusk that evening to get some emergency supply from the shop. She felt abnormally apprehensive as she walked the streets of the Pit. She told herself that her feelings were absurd, but she could not still them; and then, about half-way to the shop, she saw something that made her heart stop. A big, black Wolesley of the sort driven by the police in the 1950s. She knew it from a hundred films she had seen at school. So near to home it would be a coincidence if it did not belong to Imperials. Could it be an Imperial police car? It was unmarked, of course, but just what one would expect the Imperial police to drive. The car was empty, but she dare take no chances. She turned round to retrace her steps, and there behind her were the two smartly 1940s-dressed women whom Mme. Gauvain had described as *les flics*.

"May we have a word with you, young lady?" asked the one who did the talking. Once she would have addressed her as "miss". Even Leblanc would probably be called "miss", but Delacourt's apron, without a trace of frill on the shoulder straps, marked her out clearly as a maid of the lowest rank. In the Empire it was not just a custom of individual homes, but a mark of status—or lack of it—as unequivocal as that of a soldier with no stripes on his sleeve.

"I—I can't, I'm on duty," said Delacourt foolishly.

"I'm afraid we must insist."

Delacourt turned desperately and tried to run. The one who did not speak caught her up in a few steps and took her arm in a vice-like grip. For the first time Delacourt heard her voice.

"Now, now, dear. Let's not have any of that." Her manner was firm but reassuring. Delacourt felt her panic subsiding a little. The other *flic*

was with them now. They walked one each side of her to the Wolesley. The talking one ushered her into the back seat, walked round the car and let herself in by the other door to sit beside her. The other got into the driver's seat and started the engine.

"Where are you taking me?"

"Not far at all, young lady. Colonel Chelverton wants to see you."

They drove no more than three blocks and pulled up behind a large, gleaming bottle green 1930s Bentley. The talking one walked round the car again, courteously let Delacourt out, escorted her to the Bentley and put her in the front passenger seat beside Lady Chelverton, who started her engine and drove off immediately.

"So you did recognise me, my lady," said Delacourt.

"Colonel Chelverton, Imperial Guard, at your service. Never forget a pretty face, even on a serving-girl."

"You didn't give a flicker of recognition this afternoon, my lady."

"No. Subtle, aren't I? We've been looking for you for quite a long time."

"Now you've found me," she said helplessly.

"Yes. Lavinia Delacourt. Do they still call you that?"

"Just plain Delacourt, my lady."

"Do you enjoy being a slavey, Delacourt?"

"I've no complaints, my lady. I'm harming no one. I only ask to be left as I am."

"Most fetching. Nice unassuming girl. No kitchen should be without one."

"May I ask where you are taking me, my lady?"

"Back to your mistress—by a slightly circuitous route. I want a few words with you. I shall have you back quite shortly. I am afraid you'll be whipped for dawdling, but that is all."

Delacourt began to breathe more normally, though she was still very puzzled.

"The reason I have been trying to trace you all these weeks is that I have cause to believe that you have been the victim of a miscarriage of justice. However, that is not what concerns me at present, and it should not be what concerns you. What can you tell me, Delacourt, about Rachel Valentine?"

"Is that Miss Rachel who lives upstairs at the house, my lady?"

"Top marks for deduction. We could use you in the Force."

"You've taken an interest in her for some time, haven't you?"

"Very perceptive. But if you do not mind, I am asking the questions at present. What can you tell me about her?"

"She is being savagely beaten for the amusement of a group of bon-

gos who pay for the privilege. Her nerves are being wrecked and something ought to be done about it, my lady."

"I know all that. It is not quite as easy as it seems."

"Well if the worst comes to the worst can't you call the police?"

"We *are* the police."

"I mean——"

"Well, what *do* you mean?"

"My lady——"

"You mean the bongo police, don't you?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Delacourt, I am surprised at you. I thought you had at least the vestige of a brain. Do you know what would happen if the bongo police got hold of her? She would be put into what they call 'care'. Do you know what that means? It means a home for the very lowest and most degraded juvenile refuse of the Pit, run by glassy-eyed brain-washees of the worst sort. I heard of a native Christian mother who had her daughter kidnapped by bongo 'social workers' and put into 'care' because she was bringing her up too strictly, as they decreed. After a month in 'care', the girl was swearing and fornicating as if she had never had a Christian upbringing at all—I doubt whether Rachel would learn to swear and fornicate: she would just be forced to live in a mad Hell where every one else did, and she was a butt of scorn, derision and threat because she did not—after six months the girl was pregnant. When the mother complained they would not even accept that anything was wrong. Why shouldn't she be pregnant? She has her own life to lead, hasn't she? That is not an extreme case. That is the norm—only most of them are on vile hormone-drugs that destroy their femininity and prevent them from getting pregnant.

"But never mind 'care'. You've lived in the Pit, Delacourt. Can you seriously say that going to one of their filthy schools or having her mind debauched by their television would not be infinitely worse than the life she is living now?"

"Of course not. She is a wonderful girl. Sensitive, fine and high-souled. It makes one ill to think what she would be if she had been brought up in the Pit. Living in the Empire one sometimes forgets how absolutely putrid every inch of it is,"

"Never turn your back on the enemy, Delacourt. But down to business. We are getting Rachel out. We are prosecuting the malefactors. We need a girl on the inside. You, Delacourt, are she."

"Very good, my lady."

"Now it would help a lot if we could find out when they are going to hold their next beastly Session. I doubt if the girl is told in advance."

"No, my lady. But one of Mme. Gauvain's maids, Vasarde, attends the Sessions."

"Is that helpful?"

"It is, my lady, because as it happens I share a room with Vasarde. I shall know if she leaves in the night. I knew last time, but then I had no idea what it meant."

"Delacourt, you are the right girl in the right place at the right time. Now this is what you do. When Vasarde gets up, put your coat and hat on, leave the house quietly, putting the door on the latch. Go to the bongo telephone kiosk on the corner and dial this number. Say 'Aunt Jane is dying'. Then go back, leave the door on the latch and wait. It won't be long. Don't let any one see or hear you and for Heaven's sake make sure Vasarde isn't just answering a call of nature, or we shall end up staging an extremely foolish raid. This is your shop, I believe. Any questions?"

"No, my lady."

"By the way, Delacourt, I am not empowered to command you to do any of this. Do you volunteer?"

"Of course, my lady."

"Good girl."

Colonel Chelverton was right: Delacourt was whipped for dawdling. She could find no plausible explanation for the time she had taken on her expedition to the shop, and took refuge in an ignorance of the French language the like of which she had not displayed for weeks. Fortunately her reputation as an *imbécile*, and the fact that Leblanc was really more interested in having her whipped than getting a satisfactory explanation of her conduct, forestalled more minute enquiry.

She held her ankles tightly in the middle of the kitchen while Mme. Fournier lifted her black skirt and white nylon petticoat well back over her full hips, displaying not only thigh and suspender, but the expanse of her thin white uniform knickers, tautly containing her rounded bottoms as they swelled out from the confinement of her elasticated girdle. Leblanc and Vasarde, reclining in chairs like an audience at a play, murmured appreciatively at the sight of the slavey's flesh, still deeply reddened from Mme. Gauvain's recent whipping by courtesy of Ella. This was going to hurt her more than usual.

Mme. Fournier picked up her coarse, hard-thonged martinet and lashed it fiercely across the seat of the knickers. Delacourt gasped. Mme. Fournier smiled complacently. She was not excited by the proceeding as the two younger maids obviously were, but she enjoyed doing a job well. She drew back her large, strong arm again and directed the lash across the

thighs. The heavy, purple weals stood out strongly against the general reddening of the flesh. Delacourt managed somehow to take the stroke in silence, but there was a small squeal of delight from Leblanc.

Mme. Fournier turned and fixed her gaze upon the parlourmaid, who was sitting demurely straight-backed with her hands folded neatly in her lap and her white apron-frills of office protruding from her shoulders like scalloped butterfly wings.

Was Leblanc, too, yearning for a taste of *le fouet*?

No, madame, she was not, madame, if it pleased madame.

Then she had better learn to sit in silence, had she not?

Indeed she had, madame.

Mme. Fournier turned back to her patient who was standing quite still, bent over, with her hands grasping her ankles, enduring the spreading and deepening pain of those purple streaks. The next lash took her by surprise and she yelped in a high, girlish tone. A fourth stroke fell catching her across some of the fresh weals and drawing a sobbing moan from her.

She was briskly ordered to stand up, and Leblanc, who had been more than usually stirred by the performance, expressed to Vasarde her disappointment that a mere four had been awarded. Unfortunately she did so a shade too audibly and Mme Fournier rounded on her for the second time.

Four *coups* were not much, were they? Four *coups* were scarcely a punishment at all. Leblanc could have no objection in the world to receiving four *coups*, could she?

No, madame, she could not.

So the elegant young parlourmaid must grasp her black-stockinged ankles and reveal her beautifully-proportioned, pure, unmarked creamy thighs, displayed like moonstones above the dark welts of her stocking-tops and framed by her not-quite-regulation black suspenders. Delacourt wondered if English thighs could ever look *quite* as mysteriously enticing as the finest of French ones. In recognition of Leblanc's dignity, her skirt was not pulled so far back as to reveal the full spread of her knickers, but one saw an engaging peep of frilled white crotch disappearing between her legs as she held, with some strain, her deep-bent posture.

So, the parlourmaid wished to enjoy four strokes?

She did, madame.

Did she wish them to be light?

No, hard, madame (she knew better than to answer otherwise).

Very hard?

Yes, madame.

Very well, her wish should be indulged.

Four fierce lashes played across her thighs in very rapid succession, each drawing an anguished cry from the pretty parlourmaid and covering the immaculate surface of her lucent thighs with a livid tracery of dark welts.

She stood, she curtseyed, she bit her pretty lip with her white teeth, for the climax of pain was still mounting within her. But it was over. Mme Fournier displayed no further interest, and Vasarde and Delacourt dared not display theirs.

The next week was like a curious dream. At times Delacourt could hardly believe what she was about to do. She felt half-guilty mixing with the servants, knowing the secret she was concealing from them. She remembered Mme Gauvain's threat on the first day she had arrived. *Betray me and you'll regret it to the last day you live.* Did this count as betraying Mme. Gauvain? It was not *her* misdeeds that were being brought to justice, but Colonel Chelverton had never considered going to her. She wanted to catch the criminals red-handed. Was she afraid that Mme. Gauvain would warn them? But Delacourt could not allow herself to worry about that. She had already allowed false loyalty to a malefactor to lead her into one serious misstep. Now she must act according to principle, whatever the danger.

As the days passed the whole thing seemed increasingly remote from real life. *Aunt Jane is dying.* Was there really going to be such cloak-and-dagger business in the dead of night? And what of Vasarde? Delacourt's feelings toward Vasarde had become increasingly ambiguous. The balance of the love-hate affection had been tipped sharply toward hate when she discovered the girl's rôle in tormenting Miss Rachel, but now that she saw her each day, unknowingly on the verge of capture and disgrace (what *sort* of capture? What did the Imperial authorities *do* in such cases?) she began to feel quite concerned for her. She was only a poor, stupid thing, after all.

She felt a strange uneasiness, too, in her meetings with Miss Rachel. She decided from the first not to tell her what was afoot. The girl would worry terribly about all sorts of terrifying eventualities. The prospect of rescue by an unknown force, leading to an unknown future would seem more terrible to the girl than the continuation of the present condition of affairs. When she spoke to her she sometimes wondered if it *was* right to shake up her life so radically without her consent. But she trusted Colonel Chelverton, so wise and kind and dashing. She would always do the right thing.

Somehow she trusted also the Imperial organisation that lay behind Colonel Chelverton. She had seen little of it, but she had caught something of its *scent*. The way the Colonel talked; the manner and bearing

of the two constabls who had picked her up: everything seemed to breathe the atmosphere of true, kind, reliable authority. It was nothing like the slick, sloganised bongo-police; much more like the village bobby and the gentlemanly old Scotland Yard. Yet it was not quite like that either, because it was a feminine authority, a maternal authority—strict, yet genuinely loving; truly concerned, she sensed, with the well-being of criminal as well as victim, yet without a hint of the nauseous liberal fake-compassion of the Pit.

Perhaps that was what was wrong with barbarian liberalism—or one part of what was wrong—it was an attempt to bring maternal qualities into a masculine system, and as such a grotesque failure. The village bobby and the gentlemanly Scotland Yard were *paternal* authority: they evinced the best kind of compassion possible in a masculine society. Barbarian liberalism tried to introduce *feminine* compassion into a masculine society and ended up with a system as ugly and useless as a male wet-nurse. The mixture of authoritarianism and love which constitutes feminine authority was possible only to women, and only in a society whose foundations and values were feminine:—having semi-masculinised “career women” take a hand in operating the system did not help in the least. In a male world the authoritarianism became mechanical and oppressive, and the love clumsy and inauthentic.

The authoritarianism and love of the Imperial Authorities, on the other hand, were real. They were very stern and truly kind. They stood for right and order and harmony, without any confusion from the slogans of chaos and degeneration. They were *real* authority. They were what authority ought to be. One could put oneself in their hands. If one had done wrong one could confess to them and trust them to punish one and set one on the right path, like a kind, strict aunt rather than a faceless machine or a confused collection of individuals. One felt an almost voluptuous sense of submission in being a subject of the Empire—the sweet, curious voluptuousness of normal life. It was this that both Ella and Mme. Gauvain, with her talk of *flics*, rejected, to their own great cost and impoverishment:—but they were exceptions. Most Imperials were obedient and took a magical, impersonal-sensual pleasure in their obedience; a thing unknown outside a feminine matriarchal order.

There was a thrilling, subtle good-girl charm that pervaded the Empire: the precise diametrical opposite of the drab, gross bad-boy ethos of the Pit. Of course not all bongos were ‘bad’ nor all Imperials ‘good’: but liberal-piety, the ‘goodness’ of the barbarians, partook essentially of the looseness and disorder of the Pit, while romantic-Bohemianism, the ‘badness’—or rather naughtiness—of the Empire was organically connected with the good-girl ethos.

It struck her also that Colonel Chelverton was an angel of light in more ways than the obvious. She was not only serving the order of the Empire, but helping to develop it. She was on the side of those elements in the Empire who were creating an all-pervading, elder-sisterly Authority based on strictness, love and a vibrant, supra-personal sensuality. She was among those who were forging the Empire into a true *cosmos* with its dual implication of both Order and Beauty.—Who were building an authentically matriarchal consciousness upon the shattered fragments of the exploded patriarchal world. A New Sensibility, accessible to girls today, incorporating the best from the immediate past, before the complete decay which began with the Eclipse, but ultimately founded on a sensibility so ancient and magical that it could scarcely be comprehended.

As Delacourt lay awake, with her eyes closed, contemplating these heady and exhilarating concepts, she was startled by a noise in the room.

Vasarde was getting up.

At once Delacourt felt her nerves stiffen. Her skin tingled with prickly horripilation. She felt faintly queasy. The moment had come, and she wished desperately that it had not. Her essentially passive nature revolted against taking vigorous and independent action. Then she thought of Miss Rachel. What were they planning to do to her tonight for their nasty self-gratification? Instantly she was out of bed. The more swiftly she moved the greater the chance of preventing them from touching the poor girl. In schoolgirl fashion she tucked her pillow under her blankets so as to give the impression on first glance that she was still in bed. She dressed quickly in her black maid's dress, putting on the apron too, partly from force of habit, partly because she felt undressed without it. She slipped on her coat and hat and then began to make her way through the house to the front door. It was a terrifying progression. Every floorboard seemed to creak like the hinges of Hell-gate. After an æon of terror, she attained the kitchen, unbolted the back door and emerged into the bright, late-summer moonlight. She felt more confident now that she was out of the house. Swiftly and silently she unbolted the garden gate and ran lightly on her toes down the fuchsia avenue, strange and fairy-like beneath the pale light of the moon, slipping on her gloves as she went.

Once in the bongo street with its orange street-lamps she ran full-pelt to the grotesque, aluminium telephone kiosk. She dialled the number she had been given. A strange, crisp voice said "SPRINGFIELD 4752".

Half disbelieving what she was doing, Delacourt replied: "Aunt Jane is dying."

"The doctor will be with you very shortly. Please be ready."

The receiver clicked and was silent. She had done it. She could hardly believe it had gone off without a slip. Unthinkingly she walked back to the house, but as she reached the fuchsia hedge she decided not to go in yet. It would only create another chance for her to be caught and the alarm to be raised. She stayed in the shadows, looking up and down the street. There were three unfamiliar cars parked near the house—all of them slick, ugly barbarian cars.

"Bongos," she breathed contemptuously beneath her breath.

The wait seemed near-eternal, and yet when the first car pulled up she knew it had arrived very quickly. It was the black Wolesley, and the two constabls got out with two others. They were wearing black or navy mackintoshes with epaulettes. They looked very official. One carried a blanket over her arm.

"Good evening, miss," said the speaking one. She was 'miss' now, she noted. "Can we get in?"

"Yes, the gate and the kitchen door are open unless some one has discovered them. I can show you the back stairs which connect with the upper flat."

"I think you'd better come with us, miss. The girl may need you."

This was unexpected, but there was not time to argue. She was already being swept along with the four constabls, invading the house that had been her shelter these many weeks. Her feelings were a surging confusion of elements ranging from shame and misery to righteous determination. As they opened the garden gate a second car pulled up.

"I don't know the upstairs," she said. "I've never been there."

"That's all right, miss," said the constable. "We will take care of things once we get there."

It was not difficult. As they neared the first landing belonging to Miss Rachel's people a certain babble became audible. As they ascended the second flight of stairs it became much louder. The leader of the constabls went to the door from which the noise was proceeding and opened it suddenly.

"Nobody move please, this is the police."

Silence fell as the other constabls, with Delacourt, entered the room. There were a number of women there in elegant clothes from the 1930s to the 1950s. Some were authentic, some rather bizarre concoctions in shiny leather. One or two carried long whips of a sort Delacourt had never seen used for legitimate discipline. In the centre of the room—which was a drawing room—both incongruously and horrifyingly, stood an iron-framed bed. It had no mattress or bedclothes, but lying face down upon the metal springs, spread-eagled, with her wrists and ankles tied to the four corners of the frame, and completely naked, lay

Miss Rachel. She was sobbing convulsively and Delacourt noticed that two cruel stripes lay across the flesh that covered her long, spare form. There was only a scant second in which to take this in, for the constabel with the blanket stepped forward and covered the girl's nakedness. Another constabel produced a knife and deftly cut her bonds. With wonderful precision they had her on her feet, huddled in the blanket in less time than it takes to tell it, and led her, shaking with terror, to where Delacourt was standing. When she saw the friendly face of the maid-servant her eyes softened into an expression of half-relief. Delacourt put her arms about her and said gently,

"It's all right, Miss Rachel. We are taking you away. They won't hurt you any more."

The girl was shaking in her arms. Not just trembling, but shaking convulsively in a way that was quite alarming.

One of the younger women in the room began to sob. Another joined her. The Babylonians were confused. They were not sure whether the intruders were their own police or not, nor which to be more afraid of. The two sobbing girls seemed to be filled with as much remorse as terror. The others were hard-faced in varying degrees.

Suddenly the door opened and Colonel Chelverton came in followed by another constabel who, like two of those already there was carrying a short, businesslike-looking rubber whip of the sort used by riot police in some countries—these, in fact, were merely an alternative to truncheons and were very rarely actually used—although the bongos could not know that. Colonel Chelverton, tall and immaculate in a *svelte* black 1930s coat with a fox-fur about her shoulders, smoking a scented cigarette in a long holder, was utterly in command of the room.

"Good evening, ladies," she said. "You are not obliged to say anything, but anything you do say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you."

One of the sobbing girls fell silent and gazed at her in fascination, like a hypnotised rabbit. The other kept her head down and snuffled quietly.

Colonel Chelverton continued: "I want the Imperial subjects among you to line up on this side of the room. Alien nationals will gather on this side."

They obeyed quickly, with some herding from the constabels.

Colonel Chelverton turned to the Imperials. "Please give your name and station to the constabel here. You will be charged with Mistreatment of a Minor, Immoral Conduct and Collaborating with Aliens for Illegal purposes. There may be other charges."

She addressed the barbarians: "You are foreign nationals. We have no jurisdiction over your persons unless you choose to surrender your-

selves to Imperial Justice. For your moral well-being I advise you to do so. You will probably be treated more leniently on this occasion than would Imperials who have the light of truth to guide them. You will be punished and purified and may take your place in the Empire. If you refuse to surrender yourselves to Imperial justice you will leave now and I advise you never to be seen in Imperial territory again."

It was a standard appeal, based upon the universal claims of the Empire. As expected the bongos left, except for the sobbing girl who had fallen silent. Suddenly, as she approached the door she found her courage. She knew she could not—must not—slink out with these people.

"I surrender," she said.

"Good girl," said Colonel Chelverton. "Stand over there." She directed her to the group by the door consisting of Delacourt, Miss Rachel and two of the constabls. Delacourt was still trying to calm Miss Rachel. She looked up as the new girl approached. The new girl said brokenly: "I'm so sorry." One of the constabls drew her aside.

Some minutes later, Colonel Chelverton turned to go. Two constabls conducted Delacourt, Miss Rachel and the new girl out of the door. Suddenly Vasarde sprang forward.

"No, no, no!" she cried, pointing at Delacourt. "Not you take this one!" It was the first time Delacourt had ever heard her attempt to speak English.

She seized Delacourt's arm and cried again: "Good one, this! Her not make wicked! Me you take—she you leave."

Colonel Chelverton put her hand on Vasarde's shoulder and said a few sentences in gentle French which calmed her but left her with tears in her small, piggy eyes. For the second time in their acquaintance, she kissed Delacourt and said, still in English, slowly and carefully:

"One day come back, Delacourt."

Delacourt bent down to kiss the little maid. "Yes I will come and see you, Vasarde, if I am able," she said in French. Their rôles had changed now, very suddenly and very completely. Delacourt was a young lady now and Vasarde a very lowly sort of maidservant. Delacourt squeezed her hand.

"God bless you, Vasarde. Give my love to Leblanc and Mme Fournier. Give Leblanc a kiss from me."

Chapter 13

A Place of Safety

AND SO ENDED Delacourt's career in the Gauvain household. In another minute she was in the back seat of the Bentley, Miss Rachel, still wrapped in her blanket, in her arms. The girl was still unfit for conversation, but would occasionally say "Delacourt." Delacourt would reply, "I am here, Miss Rachel," or "Everything is all right, miss." She seemed to be soothed only by continual, repetitive reassurance.

In the front passenger seat was the new girl, blindfold and with her hands tied lightly behind her back. She was dressed in something shiny and leathery. Her hair was straight and black, her make-up styishly striking, but a bit bongo.

"Am I under arrest?" she asked.

Colonel Chelverton considered the question. "Not really. We do not often arrest people in this country. You see, our penal system works by consent rather than physical compulsion."

"You mean people *want* to be punished?"

"Not exactly, but they agree it is right that they should be."

"What if they don't?" asked the girl. She had a keen intellectual curiosity, and Colonel Chelverton encouraged her, by her manner, to forget her immediate circumstances and take interest in the new culture that surrounded her.

"The ultimate sanction in this country is the death penalty. That does not mean killing the body. It means declaring a person legally dead. A dead person no longer exists in the Empire; and since there is nowhere else to exist, that is the end of her real life. Under normal circumstances no one is executed unless she refuses all other penalties. The primary capital offence is Sustained Treason; which means refusing to accept the authority of the Empress expressed through her Servants.

"Take your Imperial friends who were charged tonight. They will not be arrested. They will be told when to appear in court. If they do not appear they will be sentenced *in absentia*. If they refuse to accept their punishments, further and severer punishments will be awarded. Ultimately, if they will not accept authority at all, they will be executed,

probably also *in absentia*. However, that will not happen. No sane Imperial would elect to lose her life merely to avoid punishment."

"So what am I if I am not under arrest? Could I leave if I wanted to?"

"Your case is a little different, my dear. The other persons charged will remain in their own homes—that is, in the Empire—until they come to trial. You, by surrendering to Imperial justice, have entered the Empire. You cannot simply leave it to go back to wherever you came from unless you wish to leave altogether. For the present you will remain in my custody."

The car turned into a long drive and parked by the side of a detached house set back from the road and enclosed by hedges. Lady Chelverton sounded the horn and two uniformed maids came out and helped the mistress and passengers out of the car. The blindfold girl was led carefully up the steps and into the lighted hall. One of the maids then took her away into the back of the house. Delacourt was helped upstairs with Miss Rachel. A bright young maid slipped the girl into a clean, warmed nightdress and popped her in bed with a hot water bottle. She was given something warm and milky to drink, with brandy in it, and Delacourt sat on the side of the bed reassuring her until, quite quickly, she fell asleep.

"I'll take you to the mistress, miss," said the maid. "Shall I take your coat?"

Lavinia took it off and noticed the maid start as she saw her in full uniform, complete with apron. Nevertheless she continued to treat her as a lady.

"This way, miss, if you please."

Lady Chelverton was reclining in a deep grey, Art-Deco armchair in her high-ceilinged drawing room, all trace of official-ness quite evaporated. Lavinia was impressed by the room—a stylish mixture of the traditional, and the streamline-moderne of the 1930s. Heavy-framed female portraits, each one having a special significance in the theatre of Lady Chelverton's life, mixed exquisitely with dashing, fan-shaped, chrome-and-pink-glass sidelights.

"Care for a cocktail?"

"Just a small one if you please, my lady."

"Small cocktail for Miss Delacourt, Anne. Not too small. How is the patient, Lavinia?"

Her Christian name sounded strange and a little frightening. She saw the maid pour a cocktail into a gleaming triangular glass from a stylish chrome-plated Art-Deco cocktail shaker. "Sleeping like a baby, my lady."



It was a beating unlike anything she had experienced before.

"Good show. I've been waiting a long time to hear that. And how are you?"

"Very well, thank you, my lady."

"I suppose we'll have to change you out of that uniform, shan't we?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Delacourt uneasily. "Or I could wear it for nursing Miss Rachel, if you'd have me. She is used to me, and used to seeing me in uniform."

"If I'll have you? My dear Lavinia, you are my guest for the present. I shall be most offended if you refuse. Yes, it might be reassuring for Rachel—if she really needs nursing. It would help to wean you off it anyway."

"Oh, yes. I do feel I need a little weaning, my lady."

"Do you really?" asked Lady Chelverton with her crystalline laugh. She seemed to find Lavinia's little ways very amusing. "Well, we'll see how you feel in the morning. Now tell me all about your adventures."

Lavinia launched into the story of what had happened to her. Lady Chelverton was the sort of listener who draws people into easy communication, and for Lavinia it was a relief to talk at length to one who could understand all that she was saying. The whole story poured out in an eloquent flood.

"My dear child, you *have* been having a time, haven't you?" said Lady Chelverton as she finished.

"I suppose I have, my lady. My French has improved immeasurably, though."

"Now I had better explain a few things to you. I began looking for you when Marjorie Wellard told me how you had been expelled from P—— House. She does not think you were responsible for the newspaper article; but in any case there has been something of a misunderstanding."

"What sort of misunderstanding, my lady?"

"Well, Miss Hazeldean—she is a dear, of course, but she does behave at times as if she was still living in the pioneer days. We do not deal with cases like that privately any more. If you were suspected of treachery you should have been reported to the local District Governess. In any case, the real point is that you were never expelled from the Empire."

"I wasn't, my lady?"

"Of course not. No private subject has the right to expel you from the Empire. After all, it is not like expulsion from a club or something. It is the death sentence."

"I knew that as soon as I left P—— house. Life outside the Empire is not life at all. That is why I went straight to Mme. Gauvain."

"Yes. I understand that. Miss Hazeldean was not even trying to execute you. She was merely expelling you from her house, which, of course, she has every right to do. But treason cannot stop there. It is not a private matter. You should have been put in the hands of the proper authorities. If you had been guilty you should have been punished in a lawful manner. If, as I believe, you are innocent, the matter could have been cleared up properly."

"I see, my lady."

"Now, Mme. Gauvain is perfectly aware of all this. She knows as well as I do that Miss Hazeldean has no power to execute you."

"She even asked if I had seen the District Governess, my lady, and I told her I hadn't. She said 'that is something', or some expression of that kind."

"'Something'! Why, it is everything, and she knew it."

"I don't understand, my lady. Why did she let me believe I was executed? Was she desperate for a new serving-girl?"

"I cannot imagine she was desperate, but she probably did not object to acquiring one. I rather fancy she quite liked the idea of enslaving a noble young English girl. She has a *penchant* for fine objects of all kinds, and enjoys the rarer *nuances* of power." Lady Chelverton watched for Lavinia's reaction, but it was by no means obvious. She certainly did not seem moved to anger or regret, although she seemed somewhat non-plussed at the duplicity involved.

"We could have her arraigned before the District Governess," continued Lady Chelverton. "I am not sure if she has actually committed an indictable offence, but the Governess is in a sort of *loco parentis* to the colony. She can issue a reprimand and give punishments within certain limits at her own discretion, even as a schoolmistress can. You would have to tell her your story, of course."

"Oh, I had rather not do that, my lady."

"Why? Are you afraid of Mme. Gauvain?"

"Not with you to protect me, my lady. But I don't want there to be any trouble on my account. After all, she did take me in when I was cast adrift."

"Oh, piffle. She could have told you my address. I'd have helped you."

"She didn't know I knew you, my lady."

"But if she had been honest with you, she could have talked it over with you fairly. I am sure you would have ended up here instead of there. We might have had you back at school in a fortnight."

"Please do not make me go to the District Governess, my lady. I was her maid. I do not believe a maid should turn on her mistress, do you?"

"No, I do not——"

"And in any case, my lady, I am really not sorry for the experience. Although I should not like to go back to it—at least, I don't *think* I should—and although I hated at least half of it, I shouldn't have missed it for the world. Can you understand me, my lady?"

"I wonder if any one could understand you," said Lady Chelverton affectionately.

A rather superior maid entered with a sheaf of papers. For a moment Lavinia nearly sprang to her feet, thinking how high above Delacourt this august serving-girl must rank. She managed to keep her seat without showing any sign of the impulse, while the maid for her part, remained wholly impassive, with a non-committally deferential atmosphere, toward the uniformed slavey taking cocktails with her lady. She had seen curious sights before in her lady's service and would no doubt see them again.

"From Constabel Serelique, my lady," she said. "It is a statement made by the girl you brought in this evening. Vasarde of the Gauvain household also seems to be willing to make a statement, but it will have to be verbal and in French. Sergeant Linda says she has taken the liberty of taking the girl to C—— just in case Mme. Gauvain were to 'get at' her. She wishes to know if you could go and question the girl tomorrow."

"Thank you, Joan," said Lady Chelverton, taking the papers. "I do like to have a spot of bedtime reading. That will be all."

"Very good, my lady."

Lady Chelverton skimmed over the papers for a few minutes until she became aware of a certain restlessness on the part of her guest. "I *am* sorry," she said. "Most boorish of me. I do get taken over by my work sometimes."

"What will happen to Vasarde, my lady?"

"I can't say. That will depend on the Magistra. What do you make of the girl? She comes across rather badly in this statement."

"Yes, I can imagine that. I really do not think she is much to blame. The Gauvain household is—well, a little harsh. That is what she is used to. She is not the brightest girl ever. I doubt if she could see much difference between what she did upstairs and her life downstairs. It is her superiors who organised the thing that are to blame, not her. Surely the Empire can recognise things like that. In the Pit the legal system cannot recognise class distinctions. They have to pretend every one is equally responsible—and, since there is no true hierarchy every one has to *be* equally responsible even when she is quite incapable of it. That is the reason for half the evil of the Pit——"

"And half the children in the Pit: but do continue."

"To Vasarde, life is a dance of power and submission, and if she treats it as an *apache* dance, that is because she is an *apache*. She can't help that. In Paris she might roam the streets, but in the Empire she is properly owned, and if she commits an offence, her betters are to blame—not Mme. Gauvain, but this Millington woman, or whoever is behind the business."

"You are a very percipient child."

"Thank you. Will it help Vasarde?"

"It may well. You see, I am not only the police officerette, I shall also be the prosecutor; but my job is not just to paint these pettes as black as my old tar-bucket runs to. My job is to play my part in advocating justice blended with compassion, and the fairest, kindest arrangement for every one—which does not, of course, mean shirking any necessary severity. The accused can speak for themselves, and have defence advocates if they wish; but I can speak in their favour too, and will wherever I can. Ours is a maternal legal system, and unlike the patriarchal system—even before the Eclipse—it is not inherently adversarial. Your advice about Vasarde may well help her considerably."

"I am so glad."

"But—since we are being so jolly serious tonight—what do you think of the Gauvain household? Let me tell you the reason behind my question. In the early days of the Empire we were a small, tight-knit family. Very warm, very strict. All the girls wanted to be good girls. It was *intimate*. Lately, as the Pit has grown steadily nastier and more people come to us for refuge, it is getting, more—shall I say *cosmopolitan*. Households like this do not quite fit in to the old pattern. Part of what we are trying to do is impose the old family discipline on every one. You see how in this case we have had to work *round* Mme. Gauvain rather than approach her directly? That is because her attitudes are not truly Imperial. We cannot rely on her uncomplicated coöperation. We have asked ourselves again and again: Is there room for people like this in the Empire? Should we be trying to reform them? Should we excommunicate them? Or should we just leave them alone?"

"Let me tell you frankly, Lavinia: I do not like having police raids like tonight's in the Empire. It is not the way things ought to run. In the past crimes have usually been smaller and were solved mostly by willing confession. Even if we accept that Mme. Gauvain is wholly innocent in this business, I do not think it could have happened in any other Imperial house. She is too jolly *private* for any one's good, and she regards the authorities as her adversaries. Can we afford people like her?"

"That is why I am turning to you, Lavinia, because you have some—"

thing none of the rest of us has. You have the *feel* of this household. That is all-important in a feminine nation. We judge not just by quantitative, measurable considerations, but by qualitative ones. If I put the question to you in a manner so simple as to seem almost crude, I fancy you are intelligent enough not to misunderstand me, so I shall do so: Is it a good house or a bad house?"

Lavinia pondered for a full minute before saying: "I *do* know what you mean exactly, my lady, and if we press the question to that extreme—as we must—I shall say without hesitation that it is a good house. It is animated by a strange sort of love, but it *is* love. It is harsh, but it is ultimately on the side of Truth rather than Falsehood. They belong to the Empire. The problem is to bind them tighter; to cement their loyalty; to make them see their interests as common with and indissoluble from ours."

"Lavinia, I was not wrong about you. You are going to be an important asset to the Empire one day. Have you any suggestion as to how to achieve the aim you put forward?"

"May I ask first, my lady, what exactly is Punitive Service?"

"Punitive Service is a sentence which may be issued by the District Governess or the Magistra's court. The offender is bonded as a maidservant for a period from a day or two to several years. In many cases she is treated with special severity during her service. There are various forms of Punitive Service, but is that enough for you to be going on with?"

"Yes, my lady. That is what I thought. I was just thinking of my own experience in the household. It was rather like Punitive Service—in fact, Miss Rachel—I mean Rachel—thought I was on Punitive Service when she first saw me. I think sending a girl to take up my position as a slavey in the house would be a splendid punishment for the right girl—I mean the girl who could *appreciate* it. It is especially effective if you don't speak much French. It truly chastens the heart and teaches one submission. I feel it did me a great deal of good. If the authorities sent girls for Punitive Service at the house, we should be giving the household something they want, and we should be making them *part* of the District authority. Mme. Gauvain could be given an official title and be invited to attend meetings. You can ask her advice on occasion, turn your charm on her——"

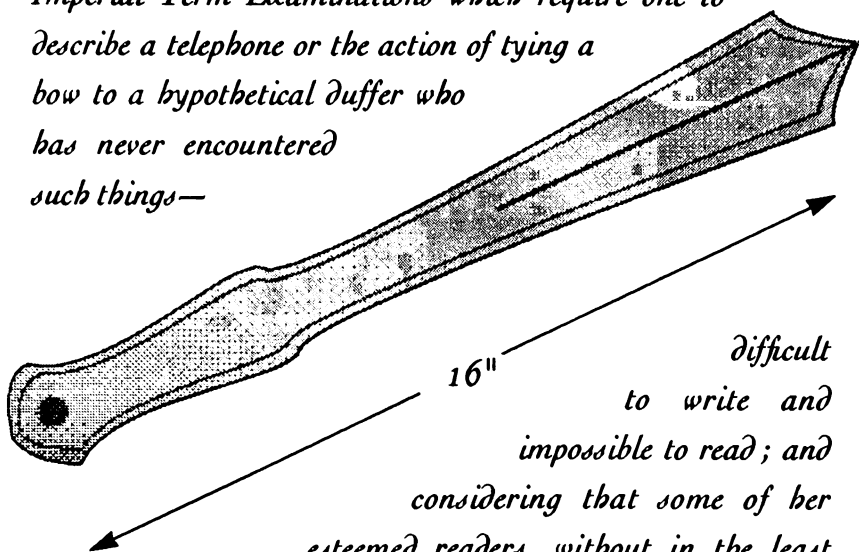
"Delacourt," said Lady Chelverton, "sitting there in that uniform, you are the craftiest little slavey in God's fair creation. Stand up, girl. Tomorrow you will put off that uniform for ever, and I'm going to kiss you while you are still in it."

"Oh, not for ever, my lady."

Lady Chelverton shook her head. "As you wish, Delacourt."

BEFORE YOU READ ON:
AN ILLUSTRATIVE NOTE ON
THE SLIP

In the chapter that follows, we shall encounter the Slip, an implement sometimes found in the Empire. The authoress, having set herself the task of describing this device on page 167, and having discovered it to be like those exercises in Imperial Term Examinations which require one to describe a telephone or the action of tying a bow to a hypothetical duffer who has never encountered such things—



*difficult
to write and
impossible to read; and
considering that some of her
esteemed readers, without in the least
meriting the imputation of dufferism, might be
unfamiliar with the slip, has wisely decided that this pic-
ture of a slip be included to take the place of a thousand words
and to leave no one in doubt as to the nature of the implement.*

Chapter 14

Plus ça Change

THERE WAS A SWISH followed by a blinding light. Lavinia blinked into wakefulness as a neat maid, pleasantly rounded and rosy, placed a tray on the bedside table.

“Will you take sugar and cream, miss?”

A neat cardigan, blouse and skirt were laid out for her: very Junior Miss. It was a very long time since she had dressed for the day in anything but a uniform of one sort or another. It felt airy. Yes, ‘airy’ was the word for it—light and free, but also a little exposed. Whoever had chosen her clothes—presumably Lady Chelverton—seemed to have aimed for an effect of airiness. Very light-coloured stockings in an unopened 1950s packet with two girls in wide skirts standing by a juke box. She unfolded the stockings from their card, long and shaped to foot and calf, with dark heels and a thin seam up the back, and so very pale—even the dark tops were pale; such a contrast to the black she had worn as a maid. She smoothed them on carefully, making sure the seams were quite straight before fastening her suspenders, and buckled on the T-bar shoes which had been put out for her.

She felt like a child on holiday as she went down to breakfast. A maid was half-way up the stairs as she appeared at the top—a mere slavey. The girl quickly retraced her steps to the bottom of the stairs and waited for Lavinia to pass. Lavinia was tempted to look at her, to see how the uniform differed from her own and how it was similar. But really—one could hardly stop and look at a slavey. She walked past without a glance.

Lady Chelverton was already at the breakfast table, and so was another girl. For a moment she did not recognise her, but then she saw that it was the girl from last night—the one who had surrendered. Her too-straight black hair was gathered behind in a pony-tail. Her glossy, rather tawdry, apparel had been replaced by neat, rather young-looking 1950s clothes somewhat similar to Lavinia’s own. The world-cynical hardness had largely gone out of her countenance and she seemed fresh and innocent, rather shy and somewhat subdued. It was as if a mask had been taken off and her real self was blinking into the light of day.

"Lavinia Delacourt, this is Janet," said Lady Chelverton. She had not been Janet last night, Lavinia was sure. She distinctly remembered having heard a different name. She had an idea that most bongos took or were given a new name on entering the Empire.

"Hello, Janet," said Lavinia.

"Hello, Miss Delacourt. Please don't think the worst of me."

"I do not think anything of you except that you look most charming."

"But last night—you see, I didn't understand—or rather I did understand, of course I did, but it seemed so different then—the way they put it beforehand:—and then when I saw you comforting that poor girl, I realised—oh, it doesn't make any sense, does it? There really isn't any excuse. You must hate me, and I deserve it."

"Hate you? Of course not. And there certainly is an excuse. A very good one. You were brought up in the Pit, where everything is mad and distorted. Of course, even they would tell you not to whip children for the fun of it; but then they also tell you not to spank them even when they need it terribly for their security and happiness. They say so many things, and most of them are twisted and ridiculous. They undermine the very foundations of morality and then expect you to adhere to a few remaining tatters of goodness, all mixed up with absurd fads and downright falsehoods. How can any one be expected to retain a real moral sense in the Pit?"

"You are very kind, Miss Delacourt, but I feel you are making excuses for me."

"No. You did wrong: there is no question of that, and you will be punished for it. But really, what you did in the Pit no longer signifies. That was before you were born. What matters is what you make of your real life now that it has started."

The girl's face lightened and clarified with relief. She turned to Lady Chelverton. "Is that right, my lady?"

"You are talking to a very wise young lady, Janet."

A maid had entered. The same one that had brought Lavinia's morning tea. During the latter part of this conversation she had been standing in silence. Now she ventured a *sotto voce* "Please, my lady."

"Yes, Mildred."

"Miss Rachel is awake, my lady."

"Would you like to take her breakfast?" asked Lady Chelverton of Lavinia.

"Yes please, my lady. May I wear my uniform?"

"Can you change quickly?"

"Instant slavey. Just add water."

"Very well, you young idiot. Mildred, have a breakfast tray prepared for Miss Rachel. Miss Lavinia will come to the kitchen to take it to her. She will be dressed as a slavey, but you are all to treat her as a young lady. Understood?"

"Very good, my lady."

Lavinia stood up. Her breakfast was half-finished. If she had finished it properly it would have been her first uninterrupted meal for weeks. She was rather glad. An uninterrupted meal seemed to her almost sybaritic just at present—rather a cloying luxury.

"Will that be all, my lady?" asked Mildred.

"No. I have decided to change my last instruction. You will not treat Miss Lavinia as a young lady. You will treat her as a slavey—*when* she is dressed as a slavey: not otherwise."

"Very good, my lady."

"That will be all, Mildred."

The maid held open the door deferentially as Lavinia passed through and then left the room, closing it quietly.

Lavinia ran to her room, changed rapidly—she had often had to change from her grey to her black uniform and back, and Heaven help her if she kept any one waiting in doing so.

On the way down she found one of the maids she had seen last night.

"Could you please direct me to the kitchen?" she asked.

"Very good, miss," said the maid, who had not yet heard Lady Chelverton's latest orders anent Lavinia, and showed her the way respectfully.

As she opened the kitchen door she was met by Mildred. Mildred was in her mid-twenties, slightly plump, but very shapely and fearfully neat in her uniform. From her apron-frills she would seem to be of middle rank, and in the kitchen her round, pleasant face had a more mature air than it had when waiting upon her mistress. Her manner toward Delacourt had undergone a most remarkable 180-degree rotation.

"Come here, girl, and take this tray." The baldness of the command quite offended her. She knew she was a slavey, but she could not quite adjust herself quickly enough.

"Very good, Mildred," she faltered.

"Mildred!" shrieked Mildred. "Don't you start that, my girl. I'm 'miss' to you, and don't dare forget it."

"Very good, miss."

"Why did you flinch like that? Were you afraid I was going to hit you round the face?"

"Yes, miss."

Mildred took her by the shoulders. Unable to help herself, Delacourt flinched again, expecting a painful assault, but Mildred only held her

firmly, her fingers digging into her with rage. "You insulting creature—we're Imperial maids, not street hooligans. What's your name?"

"Delacourt, miss."

"Delacoor'? What sort of a name is that?"

"I mean Delacourt, miss."

"Well, why didn't you say so, instead of trying to give yourself posh foreign airs? You'd better smarten your ideas up, Delacourt, if you want to get along here."

"Yes, miss."

"Now take this tray up to Miss Rachel and hurry back if you don't want to feel the slip."

"Yes, miss; thank you, miss; very good, miss," said the confused Delacourt, balancing her tray.

"'Very good, miss'—that's all you say. Nothing more, nothing less. Where were you trained, girl?"

Delacourt hesitated, wondering whether she should try to explain about Mme. Gauvain's or mumble something vague in order to continue quickly with her duties. Before she said anything, Mildred cut in:

"Of course, you weren't trained, were you?" Delacourt suddenly understood that Mildred had been so immersed in treating her as a slavey that she had temporarily forgotten that she had come from upstairs and that (as far as she knew) she had never worn a maid's uniform or said 'Very good, miss' before in her life. "Well, I'll train you, Delacourt, if I get the chance. I'll make a *real* slavey out of you."

"Thank you, miss."

"That will be all, Delacourt."

"Very good, miss."

Delacourt left the room and Mildred noticed admiringly that she managed her tray more dextrously than any new girl she had ever before encountered.

Delacourt found her way to Miss Rachel's room, pondering the delightful mysteries of the Empire. She had very much enjoyed being under a rosy, no-nonsense English maid. Despite the rather awkward start she had made, she knew that she liked Mildred; and she was impressed beyond words with the way she had immediately accepted her as a slavey upon her mistress's command—so profoundly as to all-but-forget what else she knew of her. Delacourt began to realise that there were subtle depths to Imperial life, of which she had barely scratched the surface. And then—what in the world was 'the slip'?

She knocked on Miss Rachel's door.

"Come in," said a hesitant voice.

"Your breakfast, miss."

"Delacourt! Oh, Delacourt, I am so glad to see you." Miss Rachel was sitting up in bed looking surprisingly perky, though rather pale.

"How are you, miss?"

"Oh, right as ninepence, Delacourt—well, eightpence-ha'penny, anyway. But what is going on? What is going to happen to me? And what about you?"

"I don't know, I'm sure, miss."

Miss Rachel laughed. It never failed to amuse her when Delacourt said such 'servanty' things in her cut-crystal accent.

"Give me my breakfast and sit beside me, Delacourt. Will you have some toast? I can't eat all this."

"Thank you, miss."

"Now, come on, Delacourt. What about you? Have you lost your situation? What are you doing here?"

"I think I *have* lost my situation, but there are things you don't know about me, miss——"

"I've always known *that*, Delacourt."

"At this precise moment I am here to look after you. I don't know what is happening to me next, but we are in good hands, I assure you, miss."

"What sort of good hands? Whose house are we in?"

"Lady Chelverton's, miss."

"Who is Lady Chelverton?"

"You saw her last night, miss. She was the one in charge of the raid. She drove us here."

"I didn't notice a great deal last night—but, golliwogs: you mean the one with the cigarette holder?"

"Yes, miss. That is she."

"She looks terrifying, doesn't she? What is she like? Do you think we shall be whipped?"

"She is a very charming lady, miss. I think you will love her very much, as I do; and I very much doubt if we shall be whipped unless we are very naughty—well, you won't, anyway. It is different for a slavey, of course."

Miss Rachel sat back against her pillows. She talked freely for some time. Delacourt was aware that Mildred had ordered her to hurry back, but she also knew that her purpose in being there was to comfort Miss Rachel. Mildred, perhaps might guess that also, but it was no part of the 'game' of her being a slavey, and so would not be taken into account.

When at last she stood up to go, Miss Rachel said "Golliwogs! Look at your stockings." Delacourt did so. They were the palest of sheer nylons. Not uniform at all. In her haste, and from habit, she had forgotten

to change them. Her rapid changes of uniform at Mme. Gauvain's had never involved changing her stockings or underwear.

"I *am* sorry, miss."

"I should think you were, Delacourt. You will report yourself to whoever is in charge of you as soon as you leave."

"Very good, miss."

How exquisitely Miss Rachel understood the dance. How wonderfully commanding she was, despite her own vulnerabilities, and how splendid that she had not been soured by all her unpleasant experiences. Delacourt wondered if Miss Millington could really be all bad, for Rachel had turned out so well under her care. Could it all be *despite* it? Was she making excuses for the devil? Or was there not good in every one, and was it not the purpose of a feminine Empire to find and develop that good? In any case, Rachel would be a great asset to the Empire one day. What a fine world it was.

"So here you are at last, girl," said Mildred. "What have you been doing? Taking your holidays early?"

"I was talking to Miss Rachel, miss."

"Talking to Miss Rachel. I suppose you think it is part of a slavey's work to take tea with the quality?"

"No, miss. Please, miss?"

"Yes, Delacourt?"

"Miss Rachel instructed me to report my stockings to you, miss."

Mildred's eyes travelled down to the slavey's legs. Her finely-shaped lips compressed in anger. In truth she was as annoyed with herself for not having noticed them as she was with Delacourt.

"I think it's time you learned a lesson, Delacourt. Open that drawer and fetch the slip." Delacourt opened the drawer indicated. On top of some folded table linen lay a dark coloured object, some sixteen inches in length, shaped rather like a broad dagger with no hand-guard, or like a very small Roman short-sword. It was made of flat leather, like a strap, had a wide 'pommel', curving inwards to the convex handle and outwards again to its widest point (some one and three quarter inches wide) at the base of the 'blade'. The rest of its length was a long, double-concave, about one and a quarter inches wide at its narrowest point, widening again and then coming in sharply to a final point. For three quarters of the 'blade', it was split in two. Essentially, it was a very shapeless, very stiff little two-tailed strap. So stiff that it did not bend in the least when picked up, nor did the two tails show any separate movement.

"Is this the slip?" asked Delacourt.

"It is. Now, bend over the back of that chair and put your hand on the seat."

It all seemed rather tame compared to kitchen-whippings at Mme. Gauvain's. Mildred lifted Delacourt's skirts, clicking her tongue at stockings so pale that there was scant contrast between their darker tops and the slavey's pale thighs swelling gently above them. She put her free arm round Delacourt's waist, holding her in place in a manner which felt comforting, then with a sharp slap she applied the stiff little slip, admiring the deep pink imprint of its shapely form upon the girl's soft flesh. Delacourt drew in her breath. The impact was somehow *deeper* than she had expected.

"Yes, it does hurt, doesn't it, my girl? Four strokes for failing to hurry back when instructed."

The four strokes were applied firmly and quite rapidly, causing Delacourt's breath to quicken. She was very sensitive to pain, and she found it surprising how, after receiving several very severe beatings over the past few weeks, this moderate one was as hard to bear as ever.

Mildred was pleased with her work. The slavey's thighs now bore four separate and distinct imprints of the slip. She felt the girl tense and breathing rapidly in her grip and waited for her to return to normal before announcing:

"Six strokes for improper uniform. Double if it occurs again this week."

She lifted her skirt higher, to reveal her white-clad bottom more fully. This time she was going to place all six on the bottom, overlapping each other. That would give her something to think about when she sat down! She laid on the first stroke, making it harder to compensate—and more than compensate—for the thin covering of stretched white cotton. The other five followed in rapid but unhurried rhythm. The slavey did not cry out, but was gasping as if she had swallowed a hot potato.

"Thank you, miss," said the pink-cheeked slavey as she regained her feet.

"You're more than welcome, girl," said Mildred, and then, unexpectedly put her arms about her. "Who was a *brave* girl, then?" she said. It could have been mocking, but it was not. Strong feminine demonstrations of affection were frequent in this house.

"Thank you, miss."

"It *does* hurt, doesn't it?"

"Yes, miss."

"Mildred knows. Mildred has it too. We have to be *very* good if we don't want to feel the slip. Is Delacourt going to be very good?"

"I shall try, miss."

"Good. Now you'd better go back to—back to your upstairs duties."

"Yes, I think I had, miss." Delacourt turned to go.

"Wait till you are dismissed, Delacourt."

"I am sorry, miss."

"You will be. Hold out your hand."

Delacourt did so and Mildred's rosy, open face darkened for a moment in fierce concentration as she brought down the slip with all her force across the slavey's outstretched palm. The pain was startlingly intense, replacing, for a few unendurable seconds, everything else in Delacourt's mind.

"That will be all, Delacourt."

"Very good, miss."

Delacourt made her way upstairs, pressing her throbbing palm to her body.

She changed quickly into her Junior Miss clothes and returned to the breakfast room. She supposed breakfast would be over by now, and Lady Chelverton gone; but she was not. She was deep in conversation with Janet, explaining things about Imperial life and the fallacies and falsehoods of the Pit. Lavinia was rather gratified to note that these were things that had never been explained to her. She had understood them from the beginning. Most of them she had known by instinct since her adolescence, though she had not always had quite the words and concepts with which to express her deepest intuitions. It was good to hear Lady Chelverton expound them so lucidly and compellingly, playing like a deft musician upon the fine-strung instrument of truth.

After about a quarter of an hour, Lady Chelverton touched a silver bell that rested by her on the table. Mildred appeared, rosy and demure.

"Find Miss Lavinia a hat and coat, Mildred. We are taking the air,"

"Very good, my lady. If you would come with me, miss."

Mildred was all respectful attention as she helped Lavinia into a 'schooly' gabardine and velour hat. Meanwhile Lady Chelverton was helped by another maid into the wonderful fox-collared coat of last night and a delightful hat which she set at a rakish angle.

"Mildred."

"Yes, my lady."

"How did you get on with that new slavey this morning?"

"I am afraid it was necessary to whip her, my lady."

"Never mind, Mildred. Does them good. What do you think, Lavinia?"

"Oh, certainly, my lady. When I was a slavey I was whipped day and night and it never did me any harm."

"You, a slavey, Lavinia? Kindly refrain from talking rot—especially in front of the servants; it confuses them."

Chapter 15

Official Business and a Disquisition on the Philosophy of Stockings

“WOULD YOU care to tie this about your outrageously large and lovely eyes?” asked Lady Chelverton, passing a black silk scarf across to Lavinia as she settled herself into the passenger seat.

“Very good, my lady.” It was delightful how the oddest requests were obeyed instantly in the Empire. She remembered how Mildred had accepted the instruction to treat her as a slavey—but only when in uniform. Not a flicker of surprise. Just “Very good, my lady”. It was not just a matter of unquestioning obedience, it was good form. Lavinia was thrilled and pleased by it on many levels at once—at the complete command it conferred on such exquisite imaginations as that of Lady Chelverton, at the possibilities it opened up of a world where *anything* might happen upon the whim of a moment.

“It is not because I fear they would distract me from my driving,” Lady Chelverton was referring to the veiled eyes of her passenger, “although they well might.”

“It does not trouble me, my lady. I prefer to be in darkness while we drive in the Pit.”

“Very sensible. I sometimes wish I could blindfold myself when I drive, but I suppose that would not be terribly safe. One does not wish to *fuss* about safety, of course—no harm in a half-dozen cocktails or so, I’m sure—but I think the wise pette draws the line at a blindfold, don’t you?”

“You could have a chauffeuse, my lady.”

“Yes, I could. I’ve thought about it sometimes—though I confess I enjoy handling this sleek green beastie.—What we should need if we had a chauffeuse would be one of those limousines with one-way windows. The only trouble is that the one-way windows go the wrong way. What is the good of windows that let you look out and stop the bongos looking in? What we want is windows that protect us from the awful sights of the Pit, while allowing the natives to get a glimpse of us.

After all, we're probably the only decent thing they'll see all day. Just think what spiritual comfort they may derive from the sight of a real human being just where she might least be expected. It might turn the whole course of some one's life."

Her musical voice ran on throughout the journey; her conversation light, but always clever and amusing. It could have been brittle, but it was not; it was always warm and real: always a voice from the long-lost home one had never had.

"Not far now, but don't take off the hoodwink until I tell you."

"Very good, my lady."

"And don't keep saying 'Very good, my lady'. Servants say that, and only servants. It sounds silly in a young lady."

"I am sorry, my lady. I can say it when I *am* a maid, can't I?"

"I shouldn't think so. I am very rarely addressed by a slavey. I have other maids to deal with them for me."

The car pulled up but Lavinia's blindfold was not removed until she was inside the house. It was a smaller house than either Lady Chelverton's or Mme. Gauvain's and was furnished in a style that was up-to-date, but very suburban in the manner of the 1940s or '50s. In a certain sense it seemed even 'realler' than the other Imperial houses she had known, because there was nothing about it of the theatrical, but was full of a thing which the Pit had lost entirely—the quiet romance of sane everyday life.

The house belonged to one of the constabls, who took them to a little bedroom where Vasarde was sitting on the bed. She seemed quite out of place in that bright suburban room, so quintessentially English. She looked smaller than ever and quite devoid of her usual rather rough vitality. Lavinia noted that the door had not been locked. Vasarde was not a prisoner in the physical sense, but she knew that to leave could only make her position worse. She had certainly not been treated harshly, either physically or verbally—but perhaps that had only served to make her feel less at home.

She looked up when Lavinia entered the room. Her face lightened and she said "Delacoor'!", and then, correcting herself, "Mademoiselle Delacoor'." Lady Chelverton entered and she rose to her feet, somewhat abashed that she had not already done so for Mlle. Delacourt.

Lady Chelverton sat herself in the miniature armchair in the corner of the little room—it seemed like a throne when she took it—and began to question the girl in French. As always, she seemed able to put the girl at her ease and induce her to tell her story with a freedom and loquacity she had never shown before. In truth, there was little enough to tell. She had been engaged by Miss Millington secretly—presumably

because she thought her audience would be fascinated by the ungainly, but unquestionably genuine little French maid. She had whipped 'that girl' on some occasions, and on some occasions had been whipped herself. She had taken off her dress and been flogged on her back and shoulders, because such severe marks on her lower parts would have been seen by Leblanc or Mme. Fournier when they punished her. She had been flogged hard, with long whips. She knew that she was considered to have done wrong, but did not seem sure exactly what aspect of her conduct had brought her to this pass. On the whole she was inclined to think it was the large sums she had taken in payment for her services—half a crown for every Session, and five shillings when she herself was whipped.

Lavinia knew that there was little or no opportunity for a servant to spend money in the Gauvain household, nor anywhere to keep surplus luxuries. She wondered what Vasarde could want the money for. This proved to be the most difficult part of the interview. Vasarde at first stubbornly refused to answer, and it took all Lady Chelverton's powers of persuasion to extract from her the fact that—like any good French peasant—she was accumulating it in the foot of an old stocking under her mattress "in case of troubled times".

They drove away with Vasarde in the back seat. Their next stop was a smart native hotel. Lavinia winced a little.

"Sorry, old pippin," said Lady Chelverton, "we shan't stay long, but you must keep an appointment."

"I?" asked Lavinia.

"Well, not really you—at least I hope not."

They took a seat in the bar and ordered coffee. After a short time a rather unpleasant-looking specimen walked past. She was at once too hard-faced and too loose-faced, in the awful way that typifies the bongo career-woman. Her hair was deliberately half-kempt—one could have forgiven her if it had been accidental—and she looked as if she had all the masculine vices with none of the masculine virtues.

"You see that bongo?" said Lady Chelverton. "You are to go up to her and ask if she wanted to see you."

Remembering her previous thoughts on the unquestioning acceptance of strange requests, she simply said:

"Very—I mean, yes, my lady."

She went up to the bongo, who was clearly looking about for some one, and asked: "Were you looking for me?"

The bongo stared at Lavinia as if she had arrived from outer space, said curtly: "No," and passed on, still looking for some one.

Lady Chelverton stood up and came over to Lavinia.

"I think it is I you were looking for," she said, but she said it to Lavinia, not the bongo. She was clearly very pleased by the encounter, utterly meaningless as it had been to both parties. She then put her finger to her lips and followed the now-receding bongo at some distance, until they saw her approach a table. The bongo sat at the table, joining the girl who was already there and who had her back to Lavinia and Lady Chelverton. She looked like an Imperial girl from her dress. Quite young, but rather over-sophisticated in appearance. Lavinia realised that she knew this girl. If she turned round she would recognise her. Even without her turning round she knew really. It was on the tip of her mind. Who was she? Of course! Ella.

"Just saunter along toward them," said Lady Chelverton.

They seemed to be arguing.

"You said you had something for me," the bongo was saying.

"Nonsense, *you* said——"

Lady Chelverton tapped the bongo on the shoulder. "Please excuse me for interrupting," she said, "but may I introduce Lavinia Delacourt."

The bongo turned and stared at Lavinia.

"You again," she said in her dreadful sub-cockney, classless-career-woman accent. "Are you trying to wind me up? You're not Lavinia Delacourt, she is." She gestured at the suddenly wide-eyed and ghostly-white girl sitting across the table from her.

"There would appear to be some confusion," said Lady Chelverton with imperturbable politeness. "Perhaps I should introduce every one. You are Kate Lacquey, newspaper reporter. This is Ella Sanders who claims to be Lavinia Delacourt for the purpose of giving foolish stories to gullible journalists. This is Lavinia Delacourt, who is contemplating an action for libel against your paper. It may possibly clarify things further if I explain that the girl who telephoned your secretary this morning promising you a juicy new story was neither Miss Delacourt nor Miss Sanders, but my second parlourmaid, Florence. Florence also telephoned Miss Sanders in the *persona* of your secretary, offering her a substantial payment for some further information. Does that settle your argument? I do hope so, because Miss Sanders is leaving now. Come along, Ella."

Ella stood up without a word and stood by Lady Chelverton. As they turned to go, Lady Chelverton said, in the same urbane, conversational manner, "I had better mention, Ella, that you are not obliged to say anything, but that anything you do say may be used in evidence against you."

As they drove home it seemed that Ella was taking her Right to Silence very seriously indeed—although, since her guilt was so clearly established, this was probably attributable more to sullenness than to caution.

"I hope that bongo paid you well, Ella" said Lady Chelverton "I should have wanted a good deal of money to sit at the same table with her."

Ella said nothing.

"Why did she ask if we were trying to wind her up, my lady?" asked Lavinia. "Does she think she is a gramophone, do you suppose?"

"Well, they do all say the same things, but from the look of her I should have thought she was battery-operated."

"How curious that she should have dry cells inside her, my lady, when she ought to be inside a dry cell. But then they do say everything is inverted in the pit."

"Yes—isn't it the *brashness* of these bongos that makes them so unbearable? I do not mean any particular act of brashness, but the whole manner. Everything is somehow out on the surface. Nothing is hidden. There are no inhibitions and no depths. To paraphrase Mr. Churchill: they are such immodest little women—and with so little to be immodest about."

"Oh, yes, my lady, and is it not precisely *because* they are immodest that they have so little to be immodest about? Womanhood is like a deeply-coloured crystal phial, containing the rare and precious essence of femininity: leave the phial open to the rude winds of the world and the common light of day, and the essence evaporates. They are open and frank about everything, but there is no longer anything of value to be open and frank about. They hide nothing—but then they have nothing to hide."

"And they are so two-dimensional that if one of them were able to overhear this conversation, she would certainly imagine that we were speaking simply of the erotic nature of woman. That is a part of it, of course—an integral and essential part—but it is by no means the whole. It is an immodesty of the entire *being* that is in question: a banalisation and democratisation of the soul. It is that which makes the bongo-woman so flatly unerotic a being, but it is equally what makes her so un-fascinating in every other way as well."

"For some reason, my lady, I always associate the banality of which you speak with the wearing of tights—as if the two were symbolically connected."

"Yes," said Lady Chelverton, catching at the idea eagerly, like an intellectual bloodhound on the trail of a new concept. "They are certainly closely connected historically—that is, bongo-woman was born at about the time she started to wear tights, though she still had a long way to go before she reached the state she has come to in the Pit as it now is. But what is the symbolism, do you think?"

"For one thing, my lady, when one wears stockings, there is a part of the leg which is secret and private by definition. When I was at school I read a book edited by Miss Noël Streatfield entitled *The Years of Grace*, which is about everything an up-to-date young lady of adolescent years should know. There was a section on underwear, and it discussed the question of stockings. It asked 'are stockings underwear' and could not be quite sure, because the tops are 'undies' in the sense that they are hidden, while from the knee down they are definitely 'outy'. Stockings, then, represent the borderland between what is open and what is hidden in femininity. As they darken toward the tops, we approach the line which modesty bids us keep concealed: we approach the first circle of the Secret Places; far yet from the penetralia of the feminine mysteries, but still hidden utterly from the eyes of the profane except on ritual occasions or by breathtaking chances. With tights, everything is, as Miss Streatfield would say 'outy'. The entire leg is democratised; and if some of it should be hidden beneath a skirt, there is no particular reason why it should be. Degree and differentiation have been abolished. What was once the secret and magical world inside the skirt is now just the same as the open world below it."

"Yes, you are right. Everything has been standardised and homogenised. The entire mermaid-part, from waist to toe is 'packaged' in stretchy shrink-wrapping, like something on the shelves of a serve-yourself bazaar. Everything is sanitised and strip-lighted; everything is demythologised; everything belongs to the market-place, and whether it is actually available or not, is always *potentially* available in the most matter-of-fact, no-frills, essentially *masculine* way. Yes, Lavinia, your intuition was wonderfully right: tights represent the end of modesty, the prosaic glossing-over of all mystery, the abolition of the inner depths. Tights are the perfect symbol of the banality of the bongo-woman, and of the soul-impoverishment of the Pit as a whole.

"And what is more, I am sure they all know it. The symbolism is so true that, even though we have only just enunciated it in this very conversation, we know that we have always known it, and they have known it too. When a bongo-woman says tights are 'more convenient', or stockings 'uncomfortable', what she really means is that she is afraid of her inner self: disturbed at the thought of reviving the mysteries that have been swept under the fitted carpet and widening the papered-over cracks in her serve-yourself universe. She is afraid of unleashing the passions for which slick, post-Freudian sex is merely a cheap substitute; afraid of finding that the secrets still exist: that the ancient mystery of femininity has not been explained, but only explained-away, and that it is still there to overwhelm her very soul. She is afraid of pulling at the

thread which may begin to unravel the strait-jacket she is bound in—the strait-jacket of sub-standard, de-feminised, commercial pit-culture—afraid, because, however tightly it may bind her, it is, like the whole world that produced it, cheap, artificial and shoddily made. A few good pulls and it will disintegrate altogether.”

The psychic temperature of the car was rising, and the forward thrust of the Rolls engine seemed but a pale reflection of the intellectual journey that was taking place within. If Ella, in the back seat, was taking in any more of the conversation than poor Vasarde, she gave no voluntary sign of it; Lavinia, however, felt sure that her attention was transfixed.

Lavinia herself was experiencing a strange, warming, almost physical consciousness of her own secret inwardness, and glanced down at Lady Chelverton's fine tan nylons, filming her perfectly-proportioned calves, thinking how they represented the outward and permitted realm, while higher up, unreachably enclosed within the sacred confines of her skirt, lay the secret places she might never see. She realised more fully than ever how these secrets were but the physical reflections of other, deeper secrets; of how feminine modesty guarded spiritual profundities which could never be wholly put into words, and how the withering away of modesty under the brutal ridicule of a crassly ignorant and insensitive ‘liberationism’—promoted by those who wished to enslave women in a world of masculine labour—had stripped the world below of subtlety and richness and a great portion of those things that raised human life above the level of the animal.

“Even Vasarde,” said Lavinia (she knew the girl's ears would prick up at the sound of her name, but that she could not possibly decipher the rest of what she said), “—I shared a room with her for weeks, but we never saw each other undressed. We turned our backs on one another. She did not let me see the tops of her stockings except when she began to have me put them on for her and fasten her suspenders: and now I begin to realise that that was a sort of ritual in her eyes, that in her little way, she was inviting me to participate in what was to her a deeply sensual mystery—though I am sure she was only half-aware of it. It felt somewhat like that to me on a number of occasions and I felt ashamed of having such feelings for the strange little creature. Now I feel just a little ashamed that I did not reverence those feelings and those occasions more: did not appreciate that even Vasarde is a little shrine to the Feminine Mystery.”

In the house, Ella continued silent and sullen. It was something of a puzzle to Lavinia. If she really refused to coöperate with the Empire, why did she come with Lady Chelverton at all? She could easily have refused

in the hotel, and no one would stop her walking out now if she chose to. She was of age under bongo law if not under Imperial. No one had any hold over her; but there she sat in one of Lady Chelverton's shape-ly grey arm-chairs, looking every inch a helpless captive bravely resisting all pressures. She refused tea and cakes in monosyllables, and completely ignored several friendly attempts to engage her in conversation.

After a short time Mildred entered.

"Madame Gauvain, my lady," she said.

"Show her in, Mildred." Mildred left the room.

"What do you think she wants, my lady?" asked Lavinia.

"Oh, I invited her along to pick up her property."

"Vasarde, you mean?"

"Yes."

Mme. Gauvain stepped briskly in, ignoring Mildred's attempts to usher her ceremoniously into the presence of her mistress. She was bristling with unspoken passion, and the sight of the girl who had yesterday been her slavey sitting at her ease in the drawing-room did nothing to soothe her feelings. Lavinia rose respectfully as she did for all her betters, and Mme. Gauvain looked at her as if wondering whether there was any point in trying to claim her back. She decided not.

No, she would not sit down, she preferred to stand.

But Lady Chelverton must insist. The honour of her house could not permit her to entertain so honoured a guest thus peremptorily. Lady Chelverton's courtesy seemed almost Oriental in its elaborate stringency, yet one felt it was by no means mere banter, as was so much of her talk.

Since her hostess showed no sign of producing Vasarde, Mme. Gauvain had little choice to sit down. Perhaps negotiation was necessary.

"Do you prefer Indian tea or China, madame? Might I recommend the Keemun? It tastes perfect from these cups. I always feel that the quality of the cup is a vital part of the sensation of drinking tea, do not you? The right tea in the right cup is exquisite. The most perfect tea in the wrong cup is but an indifferent thing."

Mme. Gauvain accepted jasmine tea in a Japanese eggshell-china cup so fine that one could read print through it. Mildred hovered by the richly-painted teapot, ready unobtrusively to fill the small cups as they became empty.

"Now this young lady—I do not need to introduce her: Lavinia Delacourt—though I believe you have known her primarily by her surname. I understand that she was in your service until recently."

This was a sore point. Her trickery must certainly be known. "My Lady Chelvairston, if you imagine——"

"Please, madame, please. Pray do not upset yourself in any way. Lavinia is my friend—perhaps in some sense my *protégée*. Therefore it falls to me to thank you for all that you have done for her."

"To thank me?" said Mme. Gauvain, half-suspiciously.

"But of course. Lavinia has told me so much. She feels that she has benefitted greatly from her time in your household. She feels that it has been a formative influence upon her character—an influence for good which she may draw upon in years to come—Is that not so, Lavinia?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Of course, she may have some other thoughts as well, but what of that? A girl should not always be mollicoddled, should she?"

"Most cairtainly not."

"As a matter of fact, madame, I should very much value your advice and help. This other young lady: you know her too, I believe."

"A little," said Mme. Gauvain cautiously.

"Now she has been a very bad girl, I am afraid. I shall have to charge her with a serious offence. She is also being most sullen, almost to the point of rudeness. What do you think I should do?"

"Why, beat her, of course."

"I am not sure if that would be quite the thing. She is rather in my custody, you see. Now if *you* could see your way clear to disciplining her——"

"Do you 'ave a whip?"

"Not a whip, no. I had rather not make any marks on the girl. I have heard you were rather an expert at spanking with the hand."

"As you wish, my Lady Chelvairston. You girl," she gestured at Mildred. "Bring me an upright chair."

"You can't *do* this," squeaked Ella to Lady Chelverton.

"You are quite correct, my dear. You know your rights, as they say. People who trample on the rights of others always seem to have an exceptionally thorough knowledge of their own rights. I may not touch you and I shall not, But Mme. Gauvain can and will. Pray proceed, madame."

The powerful Frenchwoman stood up and seized Ella by the arm and, sitting on the upright chair provided by the maid, lay the girl across her lap, turning up the skirts of her sophisticated, grown-up dress. Lady Chelverton leisurely took out a cigarette and inserted it in her holder. The air filled with the delicate, scented smoke, with the resounding slaps of Mme. Gauvain's strong, practised hand and with the cries and whimpers of Ella Sanders. The giving of a really sound hand-spanking is an art in itself—an art of which Mme Gauvain was a true mistress. Each slap was so hard that it seemed she must tire quite quickly, but to the ad-

miring surprise of Mildred and Lavinia, and the anguished distress of Ella, it went on—and on.

Lady Chelverton finished her cigarette and lit another. It was rare for her to smoke two cigarettes in one sitting. Her pretty black bob was so perfect, her eyes so serene and intelligent, as she sat at ease in her deep, Art-Deco armchair enjoying the spectacle of a true artist at her work.

When Ella finally regained her feet, she seemed a different Ella: subdued, quiet, tearful.

"Would you care to kneel at my feet for the remainder of this interview?" asked Lady Chelverton kindly.

"Yes, my lady," said Ella.

The spanking had changed the atmosphere of Mme. Gauvain. She was less reserved now, and more open to her hostess ("Nothing like spanking a pretty young girl for breaking the ice at a frosty tea party," Lady Chelverton was to quip to Lavinia later, but now she was all earnest politeness).

"Thank you so much," she said to Mme. Gauvain. "That was beautifully done. And now I must come to a matter which may be of some importance to both of us—but since you have done me the kindness of conversing in English thus far, may we have the pleasure of completing our talk in *your* charming language?"

This was a master-stroke. Mme. Gauvain, warmed already, now seemed almost to glow. Lavinia found it possible to grasp the better part of the ensuing conversation. Lady Chelverton was putting to her guest essentially the proposition suggested by Lavinia the night before—that she should accept girls for Punitive Service. She explained the various advantages both to the Gauvain household and to the Empire. Delacourt could be quickly and easily replaced. She hinted at an official title and position for the Frenchwoman, flattered her household and exerted the Chelverton charm to the fullest.

Mme. Gauvain was by no means what the hypnotists term a susceptible subject. She was shrewd enough to see that the object was to co-opt her into the system and shrewd enough also to see its advantages; she guessed also that toleration of her anti-social foibles was wearing thin. Nonetheless, she was an obstinate woman with an innate dislike of any authority beyond her own. She was probably more than half won over, but she promised only to consider the proposition very seriously. She was canny enough to know when she was being charmed and to insist upon making her decision away from influence. Lady Chelverton shook her hand warmly on this partial bargain and bade Mildred fetch Vasarde.

The girl was ushered into the presence of her mistress, clearly terrified, and no doubt with good reason.

"One slavey in the same condition as found," said Lady Chelverton. "She is yours once more for the present—though I am afraid she will have to appear before the Magistra shortly in connexion with certain charges. You will be given the full details, of course."

"They will not take her away, will they?" asked Mme. Gauvain. Her concern was greater than might have been expected. The loss of Vasarde would certainly be an inconvenience, but it seemed unlikely that Mme. Gauvain would find it impossible to replace a rather low-grade and unprepossessing slavey. One began to wonder whether, despite her hard exterior, she did not regard her household as something more than a mere egotistical possession. One might almost suspect that, in her own way, she was bonded to her servants even as they were bonded to her, as a true mistress should be—that her authority was not merely matriarchal in the loose sense, but ultimately maternalistic.

Lady Chelverton warmed toward her, revised favourably her assessment of the value of the Frenchwoman to the Empire, revised also her own strategy and played her last card.

"Take her away? I really cannot say. The case is certainly serious enough for a custodial sentence, though I feel there are ameliorating factors. It is my job to give my own advice to the Magistra, but her decision is her own. Of course, if your household was authorised for the care and control of offenders, it would make it much easier for us to leave her in your hands."

Lady Chelverton was sailing close to the wind. She should not really say such things, but she wanted to tip the balance of Mme. Gauvain's decision and was not above bending the rules very slightly where the wellbeing of the Empire and of the individuals within it were concerned. The Frenchwoman's reaction surprised her—her rogueish mind interpreted her words much more strongly than they had been intended. The notions of impartial justice and disinterested authority were alien to her nature. She took Lady Chelverton's words as a piece of straightforward Machiavellianism: a simple threat and a simple promise. And what was more, she did not seem to mind. She was on territory she could understand. She smiled broadly for the first time in the interview.

"Vairy well, my Lady Chelverton. You win."

The Frenchwoman left with her property.

"Now then, Ella," said Lady Chelverton, "I think it is time we had a proper talk, don't you?"

"Yes, my lady," said Ella with an awkward sort of meekness.

"Now, Ella. You are at something of a crossroads. You are going to have to think seriously about where you are going in life. There are es-

entially two ways you can go, but what you cannot do is continue in the way you have been going. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I am not sure, my lady."

"It is quite simple, Ella. You can be in the Empire or out of the Empire, but you cannot hover half-way."

"I have always been in the Empire, my lady."

"That is a disingenuous answer, Ella. Please do not try to manoeuvre. There is no further room for manoeuvre as far as you are concerned. You have set yourself against the Order, both at your school and elsewhere. Since you have been with me you have been resisting me—and yet you came when I ordered you to in the hotel. You cannot live in the Empire and set yourself against the Empire. What do you really want?"

"All right, I'll tell you the truth. I have been mixing with some bongos. I have thought about breaking away from Imperial discipline. But the bongos are so *awful*. There is nothing to them, they are flat and dull and noisy and empty. I couldn't live in that world all the time; I'd go stir-crazy. So I can't leave the Empire. So here I am—but I don't have to like it."

Her hardness was returning as the good effect of the spanking wore off.

"You realise, Ella, that you will have to appear in court and that you will be punished severely for your offences?"

"Yes, I suppose so, my lady." She seemed resigned and laconic, and, although she was no longer silent, just as impenetrable as when she had been. However, the spanking *had* helped her momentarily. Perhaps longer and severer punishment was what she needed. Perhaps, whether she knew it or not, it was what she *wanted*.

"Very well, Ella. You may go. I shall see you at your trial, unless you decide to abscond."

"You will see me, my lady," sighed Ella.

Chapter 16

The Imperial Court

HER BLINDFOLD was removed, and Lavinia found herself sitting among a number of others at the back of a large room. The room was draped from floor to ceiling with blue velvet. For a moment one wondered why the effect was so *very* unusual, and then one realised that all the permanent features of the room were covered, so that one could not even tell where the door and windows were. It seemed like a completely strange room, but it was possible that she had been here before, perhaps many times. She did not think so, but there was simply no means of telling.

At the front of the room stood a tall lectern-desk with a high chair behind it, of a sort made for Victorian schoolmistresses. At this desk sat the Magistra, a small woman in her early sixties with steel-grey hair and mild, clear, blue eyes. She wore a black dress and over it a robe somewhat like an academic gown.

There were two lower desks at each side of her. On her left was the Recorder with her great black book and dip-pen, looking rather like a superior secretary from a 1930s office. On her right was the District Governess, a very smart woman in her late forties, wearing a maroon coat and skirt with black lapels. Her hair was permed and her whole air was that of the mid-1950s. Her stockings were dark, slate-grey 1950s nylons, her shoes, of moderate heel, matched her coat and skirt, as did her neat little leather bag on the floor beside her. She was wearing an academic gown—an actual academic gown, rather than a legal robe of office. She looked attractive in an understated, conservative manner, with a hint of reticent, donnish humour about her intelligent features.

Between the District Governess's desk and the Magistra's lectern stood the Prælictix, a tall, striking woman in her twenties, decidedly attractive, but with an air of being somewhat inward-turned; quite unaware of her own comeliness and with an atmosphere of careful conscientiousness and quiet pride about the things over which she had guardianship and the ceremonial function that she had the honour to fulfill. While she had not the scholarly *aisance* of the Magistra or the District Governess, her beautiful, self-contained countenance was alive

with a more quotidian and practical intelligence and a sense of obedient authoritativeness that is purely feminine. She looked like one who has matured without losing her adolescent passions and loyalties. A girl one could trust. In office, she strove successfully, and with the most delightfully demure concentration, to project nothing of her own personality and everything of her formal and ritual function.

Behind the Prælictix was a long, iron-bound oaken chest of some antiquity. In one rear corner of the room stood a furled flag whose colours were predominantly purple and gold, and in the other a stand, whereon was placed, looking over the room, a fine statuette which may or may not have been intended to represent the Virgin Mary.

Midway between the Magistra's lectern and the rows of chairs which formed the Public Gallery wherein Lavinia was sitting, stood a small sturdy table, with nothing upon it.

On the wall at the left of the public gallery was another, smaller group of chairs, where sat a number of people, some of whom Lavinia recognised—Ella, Vasarde, Janet, and the woman who had stood behind Rachel at the window. A constabel stood on either side of this group and on the opposite side of the room was a large, dark blue rug with a constabel standing on either side of it. Beside that, nearer the Magistra's lectern was a smaller white rug.

The Prælictix read aloud from a scroll in a careful, drama-school voice which reminded Lavinia of a young actress in a very up-to-date film.

"*Salve Imperatrix, salve Regina.* By Royal and Imperial Decree, and under the hand of Heaven, the twenty-third sitting of Y—— Crown Court in the Imperial Province and Sovereign Nation of Q——."

The Magistra lifted her small gavel and sounded three knocks on her lectern. "Let the sitting commence," she said.

The Prælictix read again from her roll:

"Annalise Mary Lucetta Benson. Junior subject. Secretary at the Imperial Press."

A pretty girl, chronologically of about thirty but younger in reality, stood up from among the group at the side and crossed the room to stand on the blue rug. She looked uneasy as she passed the empty table at the centre of the room. She was wearing a neat blue day-dress with a pleated skirt and a blue pill-box hat. She had immaculate white gloves and well-polished white shoes.

"Miss Benson," said the Magistra in a mild, civilised voice, "You are charged with Civic Disobedience in that you did, at the O—— Cinema, in this Province, on the evening of the Seventh of July this year, refuse to accept the punishment of six strokes of the strap or—

dained for you by the usherette, Miss Rose Jarndell, and did leave the cinema after the performance, despite having been instructed to remain behind for discipline. You are further charged with Public Insolence in that you did reply, upon being called back by Miss Jarndell: 'Stow it, you officious little wretch.' How do you plead, Miss Benson?"

"Guilty on both counts, milady."

"Have you anything to say in mitigation of your conduct?"

"Yes, milady. This usherette was going to strap me for talking during the performance, but I had only whispered very quietly. It cannot possibly have disturbed any one. She had strapped me on three occasions in the past month, often for the flimsiest of reasons. I had cause to believe that she was picking on me, milady."

"Kindly restrict your language to formal English, Miss Benson."

"I mean I had reason to believe that she was punishing me for her own enjoyment, milady. She is just a common little girl. She should not have that sort of power."

"My dear Miss Benson, if you are presuming to criticise the organisation of discipline in our public places, this is not the place to do it. The purpose of this Court is to uphold the Law as it stands. If Miss Jarndell was taking a particular interest in your moral wellbeing, you should have been grateful to her. The attitude of a Junior subject to the authority of the Empire—in whatever individual person it may make itself manifest—should be one of full submission.

"Annalise Benson, you will write a letter of apology to Miss Jarndell, requesting her to administer to you twenty-four strokes of the usherettes' strap. You will also write five hundred lines, the exact wording of which will be composed by Miss Jarndell herself. You will submit these lines to Miss Jarndell who may accept or reject them at her discretion. Should Miss Jarndell reject them you will, of course, write them again—and again and again, if need be, until Miss Jarndell is fully satisfied. Only when Miss Jarndell is satisfied will she submit them, on your behalf, to the Court. We also empower Miss Jarndell to administer, if she so chooses, corporal punishment, not exceeding at any one time twenty-four strokes of the usherettes' strap, whenever she should have occasion to reject your work as unsatisfactory.

"The court releases you, Miss Benson. You may take a seat in the Public Gallery."

"Twenty-four strokes of the strap!" whispered Lavinia.

"The Cinema strap is quite light as straps go," whispered Rachel.

"It stings a lot at first and then wears off."

Two other minor cases were heard before the Prælector read out the list of names of those charged in connexion with the raid on Miss

Millington's establishment. Four people crossed the floor to stand on the blue rug—Miss Millington, Vassarde, Janet, and a woman in a short, tight leather skirt, long beads, and a great deal of eye-make-up. She was quite stylish, and might have passed for an exponent of the 'infra' style current among a minority in some Imperial colonies, except that she had the hard-faced, loose-mouthed look of a certain sort of bongo. The charges were read and all pleaded guilty.

The Magistra's benign, pleasantly urbane countenance grew more grave as she began to speak. "This is one of the most distressing cases that has come before me in all my time on the bench. In many respects, it is *the* most distressing. The mistreatment of an Imperial child is a serious matter at any time. When it is done for commercial gain and for the macabre entertainment of degraded aliens, it takes on a character at once colder and more horrifying. No one in this Court, I trust, is unconscious of the necessity for corporal discipline and of the healthy part it plays in Imperial life. However, there are clear limits which all civilised people must observe, especially in the case of those who are powerless to protect themselves.

"I shall begin with those of the accused whom we hold to be least culpable. Janet Amastelle Chelkinde, you have pleaded guilty. Have you anything to say in mitigation of your offence before I pass sentence?"

Janet looked up, almost too ashamed and too frightened to speak.

"Nothing, milady."

"Then I shall say it for you. You have come into the Empire from another place. A place wherein there is no clear morality. The fact that your offence would have been counted an offence there also does not affect the moral confusion in which you have spent your life until now. Many things which are blameless, and which all sane people know in their hearts to be blameless are also counted offences there, while many things which are palpably evil are permitted and encouraged. No one living in that place can be said to have a clear moral understanding. You took no part in the activities under consideration, and were inveigled into attending by others who are not here to stand trial today. You submitted yourself instantly to Imperial Justice upon becoming aware of the full import of the things you had been a party to.

"Janet Chelkinde, I sentence you to be caned by the District Governess. You will receive publicly six strokes of the number two District Cane over your petticoat. You will also serve nine months of compulsory bonded service in the household of the most honourable, Marchioness of Chelverton, Colonel of the Imperial Guard, as a maid-servant of the third rank. The corporal part of your sentence will be enacted immediately."

Two constables conducted Janet to the table in the centre of the room, bending her over it and holding her firmly in place. The Prælictrix opened the long oaken chest and selected, in her careful, feminine-official manner—so much more impersonal, for all its prettiness, than the masculine equivalent; so primly Archetypal—the number two District Cane, carried it forward, laid across her long, white hands, and presented it ceremonially to the District Governess. It was a short, thin cane, but was made of that dense, hard-surfaced rattan known as boon-loot. The district governess flexed it professionally in her hands, assuring herself of its perfect suppleness. Janet's neat, tartan skirt was lifted by the Prælictrix and laid over her back, almost concealing her neat pink cardigan, but revealing her fine white nylon petticoat. The loose material of the petticoat was tucked firmly between her thighs, so that the garment pulled tight across her bottom and upper legs. Her pale-pink, semi-transparent nylon knickers were clearly visible through the thin material, as were her white suspenders. The tops of her pale stockings could be made out by a discerning eye.

The cane was a little smaller than Amanda's had been, but denser. It was the second lightest cane that the court possessed, but Lavinia did not underestimate it, especially in the hands of the lady-like but very capable-looking District Governess. That lady took up her stance behind and to the side of Janet, gauged the distance expertly, and then without any preliminaries or 'aiming' taps of the sort Amanda had used, let fly with the first stroke. Her arm came back, and then forward with remarkable speed and force. The cane cut the air with a high whistle and landed with a thin, sharp crack. Janet cried aloud and the constables had to exert more pressure to hold her in place. Lavinia knew that Janet did not mean to rebel against her punishment and thought how hard it must be for one's very first taste of corporal punishment to be such a masterly caning. To distract herself from the painful spectacle, she turned to Rachel.

"What is a maidservant of the third rank?" she asked. Another stroke fell and Janet's cry made her wince.

"Quite low, but she doesn't start as a slavey." A cry more anguished than the first two. Lavinia, though she was trying to look away, noticed out of the corner of her eye that each stroke was cutting across the seat of the pink knickers. No doubt a weal had been crossed.

"Is compulsory bonded service the same as Punitive Service?" The hiss and crack came louder than ever. Janet shrieked and began to sob.

"No. She just lives under ordinary servants' discipline without extra severity." The cane fell again, causing a momentary increase in the volume of the sobbing which was now continual.

"She does fuss, doesn't she?" said Rachel.

"She is not used to it," said Lavinia a little reproachfully. The last stroke fell, harder than the others.

"Oh! Oh!" cried Janet, and struggled unsuccessfully to raise herself. She was held in place for half a minute until she became calmer and then allowed to stand. She pressed her hands to her bottom where the pain was still raging through her like a living thing, but tried to stand straight and respectfully.

"The court dismisses you, Janet Chelkinde," said the Magistra. "You may go to the Public Gallery and kneel at the feet of your mistress."

As the un-uniformed maidservant obeyed, the Magistra turned back to the blue rug.

"Jeanne-Louise Vasarde, you have heard the charges against you, how do you plead?"

"Guilty, milady," said Vasarde. The words had clearly been learnt parrot-fashion.

"It has been put to me, Vasarde, that your background and intelligence are such that you were not fully aware of the nature of your offence, and that you were led into it by your betters. On the other hand, you have deceived your mistress. Had you behaved honestly with your proper superiors, they would not have given their sanction to your part in this crime, or if they had, the legal responsibility would have been theirs.

"Jeanne Vasarde, you will receive thirty strokes of the Long Birch" a murmur of awe went round the room "*—trente coups de la grande verge.* The chastisement will take place at a later time. After that you will be released into the custody of your mistress."

She turned to the woman Lavinia had seen at the window. She was dressed, as always, in black, her hair pulled back from her head. She looked tired and austere. She was pale and grim, almost defiant—but not quite that. She seemed like one who had been carrying a heavy burden for a long time—strong, unyielding, long-suffering, carrying on dourly even in this, her hour of utter defeat. Had one not known of the circumstances, one might have fancied something wearily heroic about her.

"Constance Jane Millington: your rôle in this unhappy affair has been one that, upon its first face, seems all but impossible to forgive." There was a pause. Every soul in Court became aware that forgiveness was precisely what the Magistra wanted to give, always. Her sentences, however severe, were issued with a view to correcting, mending, re-establishing the errant soul in the *familia* of the Empire. The simple sincerity of her tone struck an echoing chord somewhere deep in the tired heart of Constance Millington. "I have read a statement made by

Miss Lavinia Delacourt, who knows Rachel not intimately, but perhaps better than any one. She says that the girl's nerves were undermined by her treatment and that she was in a distressing condition as a permanent state of affairs. You, if no one else among those charged, were in a position to know what was being done to Rachel, and yet you continued to use her as you did.

"As I say, upon its first face your conduct seems impossible to forgive: and we have only the first face to go upon. You have consistently refused to make any statement to the police or to offer any comment whatever. Is there anything you can say in mitigation of your offence?"

The tone of the Magistra was such that any prisoner might have felt obliged to make some statement, if only to accommodate her so obviously heartfelt and benevolent desire. Miss Millington spoke.

"I am not one to make speeches, milady," she said. Her voice, educated, but not perfect, was thin and dry, but withal forceful; yet it quavered somewhat on this occasion, "and I do not know anything about mitigation. But I will tell you how these things came about if that will be of assistance to the court."

"I think it might be of great assistance," said the Magistra gently.

"As you no doubt know from your records, I have been Rachel's governess for some ten years. I am also her Godmother. Three years ago her mother died, leaving her affairs in complete chaos. The house was lost, and there was scarcely money enough to pay for the funeral. Rachel's mother was like the girl herself—dreamy, feckless, idle, incompetent. Please do not think I did not care for her. I did care for her. I did everything I could for her and hers, during her life and afterwards. When she died I regarded Rachel as my responsibility. I rented a flat from Mme. Gauvain, who had been my mistress's dressmaker, using the little savings I possessed. I continued to educate the girl and to care for her.

"Financially things were extremely difficult, but I got by somehow. Sometimes I did not know how I should get through the month, and I should like to record that on two several months, when things were impossibly difficult, Mme. Gauvain waived her rent. On a few occasions I assisted in Mme. Gauvain's shop. The arrangement did not suit her entirely as she likes to have her assistants under the discipline of the whip, which was not apropos in my case. However, when her usual assistant was unwell, or when the pressure of business was very great, I was glad to help her in return for a reduction in the rent, since there was no one else in her household really capable of doing the job. It was on one of those occasions that I met the person who was to introduce me to Miss Leaver——"

"Was that Miss Julie Leaver, your fellow defendant?"

"Yes, milady. This woman—I forget her name, if indeed I ever knew it—this woman and I fell into conversation and I told her something about Rachel—how feckless and dreamy she was, and how she required a great deal of thrashing. She was very interested and asked me to meet her at another place. She said it might involve my making some money. Naturally I was interested. I went there and she introduced me to Miss Leaver. I suppose that is all I have to tell you. You know what her proposition was and what came of it, milady. Whether or not that mitigates anything, I cannot say. It is all I can tell you."

"What of the girl's nervous condition? Were you aware of it?"

"Of course I was, milady. Her mother was always a bundle of nerves, too. It is a family characteristic." Her reply was terse. Her brief eloquence was drying up.

"One last question, Miss Millington. Do you love Rachel?"

The question seemed to nonplus Miss Millington.

"Love her, milady? I am afraid I don't know whether I love her or not."

"Suppose I were to tell you that you will never see Rachel again?"

"Never—never see her again. But, milady—" her voice cracked with a strange, distant anxiety—"who will look after her?"

"Do not worry about that. We shall see that she is well looked after."

"Well, in that case, milady, I can see no real objection." Miss Millington had recovered herself, and yet her voice seemed drier and more hollow than ever.

"Constance Millington, I believe——"

"Please, milady, can I say something?" Rachel screwing up her courage had stood up to blurt out the words. The Magistra looked down at her indulgently.

"You can take a hundred lines for that unseemly interruption, my child. If you wish to take the witness—stead you may raise your hand."

Lavinia was struck by how 'schooly' so many aspects of Imperial life seemed to be. Rachel raised her hand.

"Do you wish to take the witness—stead?"

"If you please, milady."

"Very well. Come and stand on this white rug. Good girl. Now what have you to say?"

"I only wanted to say that Miss Millington has always given me clean clothes and clean sheets, and if she hadn't money for enough food it was she who went without. That is all, milady."

"Thank you, my child. Return to your place."

"Constance Millington, I believe the court understands a little better the circumstances that led up to the events which have brought you

here. We are also aware that, but for your efforts, a far worse fate would have befallen Rachel than that which actually did. None of this, of course, can excuse your offence.

"Rachel Valentine shall become a ward of this Court for a minimum period of twelve months, in the household and under the care of the most honourable Marchioness of Chelverton.

"Constance Millington, I sentence you to be caned by the District Governess. You will receive publicly twelve strokes of the number eight District Cane over your skirt. You will also serve a minimum of twelve months of compulsory bonded service in the household of the most honourable, Marchioness of Chelverton, Colonel of the Imperial Guard, as a maidservant of the third rank. Among your duties will be some part of the care of Rachel Valentine. After twelve months it is possible that you will be released from service, and it is even possible that you will be permitted to resume the guardianship of Rachel, if Lady Chelverton recommends it and if that is your desire. If you do not wish to resume the guardianship of Rachel, Lady Chelverton has undertaken to protect her until she is of age. The corporal part of your sentence will be enacted immediately."

With considerable dignity, Miss Millington went to the table and bent over it, her shoulders held lightly by the constabls. Her close-fitting black skirt stretched tightly over her hinder parts. The Prælictix, with great feminine reverence, befitting the grave nature of the implement, selected the number eight District Cane, a long, thick instrument fashioned from a dark brown rattan no longer commercially available in the West, although well known in Victorian times. A tense stillness fell over the Court as the District Governess stepped forward with this formidable implement. She flexed its heavy length and took her stand beside and behind Miss Millington. As before, she began the caning with no preamble. The cane travelled through the air with a deep, melodious *whoosh*, landing on the taut material of Miss Millington's skirt with a report that was somewhere between a crack and a thud. The whole court felt the terrible impact in their very bones. Miss Millington was utterly silent.

The caning continued, slowly, with measured and unmitigated force. Miss Millington remained silent for stroke after stroke. One might almost have thought it was not hurting her, though the two young constabls, who felt her rising temperature and the dampness permeating through the material of her dress were well aware how she was suffering. Although she offered not the smallest resistance, they held her hard, for they knew that such pressure can be comforting under a thrashing of this magnitude.

After seven strokes she began to breathe heavily, and once emitted a

small moan. The gallery thought she was about to break, but she regained control of herself and was silent for the rest of the punishment.

As she rose unsteadily to her feet, her pale-vellum face unnaturally flushed, an extraordinary thing happened. From the gallery there was a round of applause. Not noisy clapping, just a gentle tapping of hands, together, but nonetheless, an audible tribute to the fortitude of this austere woman.

"Silence, or I'll cane every one of you," said the Magistra. But there was a twinkle in her eye. "Constance Millington, the Court releases you. You may go to the Public Gallery and kneel at the feet of your mistress." There was a murmur of sympathy, for every one knew that this too would be an ordeal.

"Silence," said the Magistra again, and this time the twinkle had gone, as she turned to the last defendant, standing on the blue carpet beside the still-unreleased Vasarde.

"Julie Philippa Leaver, you appear to have been the instigator of this entire unsavoury business. Is that true?"

"Yes, I'd have to saay that's treeue," she said. A slight shock ran through the Court. She spoke with a strong bongo-accent, her 'oo' sounds pinched thin almost to the sound of 'ee', her 'a' sounds gaping wide like gaps in the dentistry. The entire enunciation casual and loose. She was not actually common by bongo standards, merely infected with the usual classless sub-cockney of the bongo bourgeoisie—a mean, debased, unpleasant sound, quite different from the honest, decent Cockney of some of the servants. What was a person like that doing here?

"Have you anything to say in mitigation of your crime?"

"Mitigaytion? Nao. It's pretty much the opposite, baysically. This isn't the worst thing I've done, not by a long waay. Di yeeou want to take the others intee consideraytion?"

"Were they offences against Imperial subjects?"

"Nao."

"Ahem—no, what?"

"Aoh, yeah—nao, milaydy."

"Then, since you were not an Imperial subject when you committed them, they fall outside the jurisdiction of this Court. Can you tell the Court why you have submitted yourself to Imperial justice?"

"Why? Baysically because I'm sick. Sick of myself; sick of what I've done; sick of every one else; sick of life. Di yeeou know what I was going ti deeo when your Colonel Chelverton cayme ti talk to me? I was going ti deeo awaay with myself. I had the pills ready and everything. Well, baysically Colonel Chelverton said ti me 'It isn't life you're sick

of, it's the Pit—if yeeou got aout of the Pit, yeeou might find life had something tee offer'. Well, so baysically what have I got to leeose? Whatever yeeou deeo to me it's not going to be worse than death, is it? I might even find something to live for."

"Very well. Julie Leaver, you will receive publicly six strokes of the number five District Strap over your petticoat. You will also serve a minimum of nine months of Punitive Service as a maidservant of the fourth rank. You will have a period of training before being given to a mistress chosen by the Court. Now, Julie Leaver, I want you to know what this sentence means. It means that you will spend the next year and a half as a maid of the lowest order. You will have no rights at all. You will be ordered about by other maidservants and whipped by them at will. You will work hard at menial labour and you will be treated with especial severity because you are a Punitive girl and not just an ordinary slavey. At the end of nine months you may be released from servitude, or you may be directed to continue as a slavey, but without Punitive status. This is a very lenient sentence for your offence. If you had been an Imperial subject I should have bound you for longer, and as a slave-girl. However, you are not yet an Imperial subject, so I want you to think carefully. Do you accept this sentence."

The bongo shrugged and said "Yeah."

"Very well. You will have to learn to answer your betters correctly, Leaver, and you will begin learning now. For that last reply your sentence of six strokes of the number five District Strap becomes seven, to be executed immediately."

The girl walked over to the table and bent over it without needing to be assisted. The Prælictix selected the number five District Strap, and even through her demurely impersonal manner, one could perhaps detect an air of maidenly satisfaction at the the weight and feel of the implement which was to chasten the flesh of this most deserving young person. It was a broad, stiff, pale strap of the 'fringed' type, divided into no fewer than six thin tails at the end. Leaver's short, tight leather skirt was wriggled up, revealing her plumpish thighs encased in tights, beneath which could be seen an absurd little pair of knickers which we shall not offend the reader by describing.

"If it please milady," said one of the constabls in some embarrassment, "chastisement was directed to take place over the petticoat, but—well, the girl does not seem to be wearing a petticoat."

"She does not seem to be wearing anything much that the Court can recognise. An extra stroke for improper underclothing."

The District governess stepped forward, took her place and swung the hissing strap. The multiple tails wrapped themselves stiffly across the

girl's bottom-cheeks which were covered transparently by the tights, and by the knickers not at all. The loud report was sharp and fleshy and the girl shrieked "Aoh, my God!" at the strap's deep, heavy bite.

"A further stroke for improper language," directed the Magistra.

The District Governess swung again. The girl shrieked again, but this time wordlessly. It was a curious spectacle. The Court was offended by her dress, manner and speech, but delighted to see at last a girl of this sort thrashed as they all deserved. As the nine strokes proceeded, she became almost hysterical in her distress. The constabls held her firmly. As she was allowed up, and wriggled her leather skirt back into place, making a most indelicate display of herself from the front, Lavinia wondered if modesty would ever come to this girl.

"Well, Leaver," said the Magistra, "do you still accept the rest of your sentence?"

For a moment the girl could not answer from pain and shock. Then she said simply, "Yes, milaydy." A murmur of approval went round the Court.

"Good girl. Since you have no mistress, you will kneel in front of the Public Gallery as a public slavey."

"Yes, milaydy."

"And Leaver, from now on, whenever you are given an instruction, you will not answer 'yes', but 'very good'."

"Very gid, milaydy."

Two more cases were to be tried. A maid was charged with direct insubordination to her mistress and the use of insolent and foul language. She received two strokes on each hand with the number four District Strap, a light-coloured, quite heavy three-tailed implement. The District Governess adopted exactly the same regulation over-the-shoulder position as Miss Wellard, as the trembling, crisply-uniformed girl held out her hand. Lavinia felt almost more sympathy for her than any of the others, knowing how terrible this particular punishment was. She did not look like a girl capable of such gross behaviour now, as her wide, frightened eyes gazed upon the neat-suited woman before her and the heavy length of the stiff leather laid itself so accurately and forcefully upon one palm and then the other, and then the dreadful operation was repeated. After watching the girl return to her mistress in a haze of pain, Lavinia kept glancing at her for some time, kneeling, as directed, at her mistress's feet, resting her head on her mistress's knee and clutching her hands to starched, white-aproned breast in agony. The mistress stroked her head kindly, and Lavinia guessed that there would be no insubordination in that household for a very long time.

And now only Ella was left. She looked shaken and subdued as she

crossed the floor, although she was still dressed in very sophisticated 1930s clothes, with a short, fox-fur-trimmed coat and her gloved thumbs resting, with an air of nonchalance, in her fur-edged pockets.

"Ella Martina Audrey Sanders, you have, without authorisation, given information about an Imperial establishment to enemy personnel. You have betrayed the trust of your School and of the Empire, and you have deliberately cast the blame of your actions upon another girl whom you knew to be innocent. Since you have pleaded guilty, may the Court take it that you admit all this to be true?"

"Yes, milady."

"Have you anything to say in mitigation of your offences?"

"I don't think so, milady."

"Did you consider the suffering of the innocent girl who was expelled from School for your offence?"

"No, I don't think so." Her answer was so awkward and embarrassed that one suspected she *had* considered it, but with feelings of pleasure.

"Very well. Ella Sanders, I sentence you to be caned by the District Governess. You will receive publicly eight strokes of the number seven District Cane with all skirts raised. You will serve for the remainder of your Summer Holiday in the household of Mme. Gauvain, a Disciplinary Officer of this District, as a maidservant of the fourth rank. You will also serve Mme. Gauvain in this capacity during all your School holidays in this academic year with the exception of Christmas, when you will serve only the first three days and last week. When you return to school you will serve as Lavinia Delacourt's fag and will additionally present her with one hundred lines each week. The corporal part of your sentence will be enacted immediately."

Ella sauntered over to the table. She looked nothing like a schoolgirl, being chronologically in her mid-twenties, yet in a curious manner, every experienced Imperial eye could see that in her true heart she *was* a girl, over-dressed, over-confident and with a *blasé* air that did not become her. She gave no sign of bending over the table and was pulled gently but firmly into position by the constables.

The number seven District Cane was of the same dark, Victorian rattan as the number eight, about the same length, but not as thick and heavy, though still die-straight. As the District governess flexed it in her capable hands, it looked much more pliable and springy. Ella's skirt and petticoat were lifted, revealing deeply frilled cream silk French knickers. Her sheeny grey silk stockings were held very high, by short suspenders, and the knickers were so deep that the flesh between stocking-top and knicker was hardly visible. The District Governess raised her eyebrows slightly, both at the frothy display—no doubt put on with

the thought in mind that it might have an audience—and at the delicate interference interposed between the cane and its more solid target. She decided to make the strokes harder in order to compensate, erring, for the girl's impudence, on the side of severity.

The Victorian cane sliced the air and cut hard into the cream silk confection, making sharp, audible contact with the flesh beneath. While it did not have the thudding quality of the number eight cane, the impact was yet jarring enough to be felt sympathetically throughout the room. Ella reared like a frightened mare, and the constables, taken almost by surprise, had a momentary struggle to contain her. Her shriek was so piercing that the District Governess was obliged to speak.

"Control yourself, child, or you will have to have extra strokes."

"Please—I can't take eight. I truly——"

The second stroke bit home, cutting off her response with her own cry.

"You are in Court, girl. Remember that." The District Governess weighed the long, dark instrument in her hand, and cut again with full force into the feminine lace. She was avoiding the girl's thighs and concentrating all her strokes upon the bottom, for she wanted to leave an untouched area that her new superiors might whip without undue harshness when she entered her Punitive Service. The punishment continued in the usual measured way, and there was a particular piquancy in the contrast between the long, dark scholastic implement, so expertly wielded and the frivolous, coquettish garments upon which it unremittingly repeated its inexorable impact; between the elegantly simple curve as it sped through the air and the fussy fronds in which its final nine inches repeatedly lost themselves; between the delicate *fantaisie* of the charming underclothes and the hard, unalterable thwack of dense rattan upon firmly rounded flesh. Ella was reduced to tears with the fourth stroke, and her sobbing intensified throughout the caning.

As Ella went, shaken and tender, into the unsympathetic protection of her new mistress, Lavinia contrived to give her a friendly look. She smiled back tearfully. Lavinia had often tried upon her little glances of sympathetic warmth and had had them all, until now, ignored or silently rebuffed. How curious it was with people like Ella. When warmth and kindness are there for the asking, they repulse them with cold independence of spirit; and when those gifts are taken away and they must go into the place of coldness, they feel at last all that they might have had.

Chapter 17

The Surprise

“**P**oor ELLA,” said Lavinia as she sat beside Lady Chelverton in the car. “She so much wanted warmth and sympathy then, my lady.”

“She could have had it earlier. You were very nice to her. She chose to snub you. Had she acted differently even then, her fate might have been somewhat different.”

“Perhaps she felt guilty with me. But you were nice to her too, and she was only civil for five minutes after her spanking.”

“Yes, but she looked at me with such appealing eyes when Mme. Gauvain put her blindfold on.”

“Oh, how awful—just when it was too late.”

“But it *isn't* too late. Do you not see? That is the beauty of it. Of course it is too late for the moment, and she will have to live through some rather thinnish times. But she can learn from them, and it will not be too late. She can still have your sympathy and mine; be one of the decent girls at school. That is the splendid thing about our legal system. It lets a girl like Ella go through the motions of making her final, fatal mistake; lets her pass into the world of shadows and learn the things that only ultimate disaster can teach her—but the disaster is not ultimate. It is controlled; and the strong hand of Mother Empire is beneath her all the time, ensuring she does not fall too far. That spanking was an experiment. It showed two things—first that severity *can* warm and soften her, and secondly that a little bit of it is not enough. Mme. Gauvain is going to be a godsend for girls like her. She can be our short sharp shock treatment—she can be used for longer sentences too—I think she will be the making of Ella, but we shall see.”

“But every holiday——”

“Sentences can always be shortened for good behaviour; but I wouldn't be inclined to let Ella off too soon. It will take several coats to varnish her, I fancy.”

“I did not trust that Leaver creature, my lady. Her reasons for coming into the Empire seemed entirely vague and unconvincing. Perhaps she is an enemy agent.”

Lady Chelverton laughed gently. "I do not think so, Lavinia. These people *are* rather inarticulate as soon as they find themselves outside the sloganised sub-reality of the Pit. That is why they so seldom escape it. Somewhere in their depths they know that the world they live in is rotten to the core, but they have no vocabulary with which to express their instincts. What we cannot say, we cannot properly think. That is partly how the tyranny works—through its monopoly of its victims' vocabulary.

"But as to young Leaver, I am pretty certain she is genuine, despite her unconvincing manner—and you might be interested to know that she has brought quite a substantial dowry into the Empire with her. It seems that her various questionable activities have been quite profitable. She has made over a rather remarkable sum of money to the Authorities. Some of it will be applied to Rachel's keep, some will be held in trust for her, and the rest will be used for the betterment of the Empire and the assistance of deserving households and individuals within it."

"That does make one feel a little more trusting, my lady: though it is really your instinct in the matter in which *I* put my faith. Speaking of needy households—just imagine Mme. Gauvain letting Miss Millington off her rent."

"Yes, The old dragon has hidden depths, what? I am so glad we have won her over to our side."

"Vasarde's punishment seemed a bit severe, I thought. I don't know what the Long Birch is, but I got the impression it is pretty dreadful. She went quite pale when the Magistra translated the sentence into French for her."

"Yes, Vasarde's punishment is objectively quite severe. Another girl with the same mitigations might have got rather less; but you see Vasarde is used to severe treatment. She submitted herself voluntarily to quite harsh floggings for money. It was necessary to give her a punishment which would make an impression—especially as we did not want to give her a custodial sentence. It is important for the punishment to fit not only the crime but the individual."

"It was a bit much, seeing all those punishments, wasn't it, my lady? Do you think they were all as you said Ella's was—I mean helping people to find another chance or whatever?"

"All the punishments were chosen very carefully. Much more carefully than you might at first think. The whole point about Imperial justice is that it is maternal. Strict, but never alien. Imperial offenders are not coerced by a violent external force, as people are in other lands. When we are caned or strapped, it is over quickly and we go back and

try to be better. When it is more serious and we go into Compulsory or Punitive Service, we must learn to yield ourselves; resign our will; become humble and submissive before Mother Empire and her representative, the new mistress. Empire is not trying to rape us or destroy us; to impose an alien or tyrannical will upon us—only to bring us home, like children who have strayed. She is stern, but only until we submit ourselves to her—and her will is not other than our own true self. Her service—as Apuleius says of Mother Isis, and the Christian Church of its Lord—Her service is perfect freedom.”

The back seat of the car was as silent as when it had contained Ella and Vasarde. Its occupants now were Rachel, Janet and Miss Millington, whom we must henceforth call Constance. Janet was taking very seriously her new rôle as a maid. She sat demurely with her hands in her lap, determined not to speak until she was spoken to. Constance sat within an unbreachable wall of dry silence and Rachel, who was longing to join in the conversation, and feeling quite bubbly, felt it might be hurtful to Constance if she said anything.

“So, Janet, we shall have to be finding a uniform for you, shan’t we?” said Lady Chelverton.

“Very good, my lady,” said the maid.

Lady Chelverton laughed. “That is not when you say ‘Very good’—only when you are given an instruction.”

“Very good, my lady.”

“That’s right.”

The other maids found a uniform for Janet as soon as she was home—one that had been worn by a maid who had left. She settled quickly to her work and was allowed to wait upon Miss Lavinia when that young lady retired to bed. Lavinia enjoyed being waited upon absolutely. She liked to scatter her clothes and let her servant pick them up, though she would have been equally happy to perform the same office for a mistress of her own.

“That will be all, Janet,” she said as she laid her head on the pillow.

“Very good, miss. Good night, miss.”

“Why Janet—you’re crying.”

“Not really, miss”

“Yes you are. Don’t cry, Janet. I was a maid for ages—a much lower maid than you. It’s hard at first, but you get used to it.”

“It isn’t that, miss—not at all. I love it, miss. I love having a real place in the world. I love the uniform——”

“What is it then?”

“The caning, miss——”

“Does it still hurt you?”

"Only a bit, miss, but when I saw Constance take her caning without a murmur—that great ferocious cane—I felt so ashamed of the fuss I made."

"Well don't think of Constance—think of Ella, or that dreadful Leaver girl. They both made more noise than you did."

"But Ella's cane was much bigger than mine, miss and she had more; and as for Leaver;—well I don't want to be in her category and I'm afraid I am."

"Really, Janet, you should not let your vanity torment you so. It was your first time. You'll learn to accept punishment as you go along."

"Do you think I will be able to take a good caning without a fuss, miss?"

"I should think so."

"Oh, *thank* you, miss."

Lady Chelverton put her head round the door as Janet left.

"Good night, Lavinia."

"Good night, my lady—oh, my lady."

"Yes Lavinia?"

"Do you think I might do a bit of slaveying again tomorrow?"

"No, I don't think so. I have another surprise for you tomorrow. A much better one."

"Oh, my lady, what is it?"

"Wait and see."

Vasarde's birching took place very early the next morning. She was tied over something resembling a vaulting-horse, her body lain along it and her legs fastened one on each side, so that her skimpy haunches were raised. Her black skirt was pulled well back and her white knickers were pulled up unnaturally high, so that they bit tightly into her crotch, visible between her parted thighs and all but disappeared between the pinched spheres of her narrow bottom. Her hands were fastened, leaving her no possibility of movement. Her black stockings were unfastened and rolled down to her knees.

The Long Birch was not made of birch rods at all, but was a bundle of seven willow switches, some thirty-six inches in length, the last foot bound in soft black leather to form a handle. It was certainly the most formidable instrument of chastisement Lavinia had ever seen, and she wondered why it had been thought necessary to pull the girl's knickers up in that ungainly manner. What protection could her thin cotton uniform knickers have afforded against those great ferocious rods? But it was part of the ritual that nothing, however ineffective, should interpose itself between the Long Birch and the Sacrifice she was to devour.

A soft pillow was placed beneath Vasarde's head—one was struck by the curious, motherly touches in the severest of Imperial rituals. She let her head sink into it, almost lifeless with fear. Even through the pillow she smelt the scent of leather, while her inner legs caressed directly the worn and shiny hide against which a hundred other girls had pressed and perspired in the dark ecstasy of pain.

The Long Birch was at present in the hands of the Prælictix, held with a demure reverence bordering upon awe. This was one of the high moments in a young Prælictix's career, and any feminine clouding of sympathy for the miscreant was cleared wholly by an equally feminine and prim faith in the absolute rightness and beneficence of the Law. She declaimed in her wonderful drama-school voice :—

"*Salve Imperatrix, salve Regina.* By order of the Empress in the person of her servants it is decreed that Jeanne-Louise Vasarde, maidservant of the fourth grade in the service of Madame Gauvain of this District shall receive thirty strokes of the Long Birch. God save the Empress."

"And Vasarde," thought Lavinia as the great two-handed rod was passed to the District Governess, who received it with all the solemnity due to so august a ceremony. The air of ceremonial was overwhelming. Lavinia could not help thinking that the Governess, in her smart, formal day-clothes looked rather like a lady mayor about to open something. It was somehow thrilling to realise that, although this *was* a ceremony, its action was to be very far from merely 'ceremonial' in the empty sense that the word had acquired in the de-ritualised world below.

The District Governess raised the great rod high and brought it down, humming, many-voiced through the morning air. Lavinia closed her eyes as it fell, hearing the multiple impact. Vasarde was something of a screamer. She had always cried out from the very first stroke when Mme. Fournier had plied the martinet on her thin thighs. Lavinia was surprised, then, to hear no sound from the voice of the little French maid—only an expulsion of breath from deep within her. The rod swung through its great arc again and again, and never a cry from Vasarde. She writhed in her bonds, wriggling her small body against the smooth, worn leather. The livid marks across her flesh were only too evident, but she did not cry for over ten strokes. Somehow one felt that she had attained a deep harmony with the ritual of the birching. She was in pain, certainly, but her experience was also beyond pain. When her voice at last was heard, it was unlike the voice Lavinia knew so well in all its moods—high, gasping cries, like those of some sea-bird soaring out beyond the ultimate limit of habitation.

Vasarde, in her odd, unintelligent way, had an intuitive sense of some of the deeper mysteries. This was not merely a punishment, but an an-

cient Rite whose meaning was not clear to Lavinia. And what of the District Governess? Was she—in her no-nonsense two-piece suit, her sensible stockings and shoes, her 1950s perm—was she too a knowing participant in this shamanistic ecstasy? Oh, yes. She was too wise, too learned not to know.

When Vasarde was unbound, she could not walk. Her apron of office was removed and her black dress pulled over her head, and she slept lying on her front in her slip in a strange bed, not to be returned to her mistress until the following morning.

As they drove back home, Lavinia asked "Was that my surprise, my lady?"

Lady Chelverton laughed her silver wind-chime laugh. "Why, did you enjoy it so very much?"

"Much more than I expected, my lady, but then I did not expect to enjoy it at all. I shall certainly never forget it."

"Well, it was not your surprise. That will come presently."

It was still very early when they arrived home. There was a sense of something like virtue and something like freedom in having taken part in an enactment so portentous before breakfast—here one was, the day just starting, still in the cool of the late-summer morning; so much already done, and what more to come—what yet to be made of this glorious day, while little Vasarde slumbered deep in the many-coloured dark of her ritual fever-dream?

It was as they were taking their first cup of tea that the car drew up: a long black car with gleaming chromium and wide running-boards. Lavinia recognised it instantly.

"May I?" she asked. Lady Chelverton nodded and she ran out of the front door onto the gravel of the small courtyard enclosed by high hedges. They were already getting out of the car—the consummate Imperial mummie in her long fox-fur and fine leather driving gloves, and Amanda.

"Amanda!" shouted Lavinia.

"Kitten!" They embraced so enthusiastically that they squeezed each other's breath out. Lavinia half-expected Amanda to lift her off her feet, for although she was chronologically the elder and they were much of a size, Lavinia could never feel like anything but a fourteen-year-old to Amanda's eighteen.

They had not eaten, and Lavinia had breakfast all over again. Lady Chelverton took more tea, and was more entertaining than ever. Amanda looked so very grown-up and unschooly now, that Lavinia kept wondering whether she was going back to school. She knew that *she* was. She could hardly bring herself to ask.

"You're going to spend the rest of the holidays with us," said Amanda suddenly.

"Really?" said Lavinia breathless.

"Of course. Mummie said you could stay with us in the holidays. How was I to know you were going to disappear from the known universe for weeks and weeks? The only way to know where a girl like you is——"

"Yes, what is the way, Amanda?"

"To give her so many lines she doesn't have time to wander. Chain her to her desk with long, dull impositions."

"Oh, *Amanda*." Her eyes became so huge when Amanda said things like that to her.

"Anyway, since you *did* disappear we shall have to make up for lost time."

"Writing lines, you mean?"

"I didn't mean that—though I suppose you will have to do a few hundred just to get you back in practice. We can start seriously when we get back to school. It is so much easier when one has a cane to hand."

"Then you *are* coming back?"

"Yes, of course. Didn't I tell you? But, I say, what *did* happen to you when you disappeared? Lady Chelverton has been most mysterious about it. Did you have adventures?"

"Yes—yes, I suppose I did."

There were only two weeks and a half left of the holidays, but they were weeks lived to the full. Endless girlish talks—Amanda was more than fascinated by the life of Delacourt—Lavinia met Imperials young and old, played games, took part in quizzes, visited clubs and cinemas and generally began to experience the richness of Imperial life. She saw Miss Wellard at a dinner party in the prettiest 1950s frock, looking several feet shorter than she did at school—quite close to human stature. She was glad to hear that she too was returning to school for the new term, after her brief exile. She saw Dorinda and Bébé at a cocktail party looking respectively blonder and more brunette than ever. They were delighted to learn that Lavinia had been a slavey, made her serve them cocktails in her most maiddy manner and vowed to begin putting aside sixpence a week so that they could buy her if she should ever come up for sale. She was almost disappointed when the time came to go back to school.

Almost, but not quite.

Chapter 18

Christmas Holidays

THE WIND was cold, and there were tiny flecks of snow in the dry air. Janet opened the door in her immaculate uniform with two rows of tiny frills on her apron-shoulders. Her face lighted up as she saw the big-eyed girl in her school overcoat and hat, but she was too well trained for effusive demonstrations. "Miss Lavinia," was all that she allowed herself. Lavinia, of course, was under no such restriction. She threw her arms about the serving girl.

"Janet!" As she released the maid she examined the second row of frills. "These are new aren't they?"

"Yes, miss, I've been promoted." How lovely to tell a girl who really understood what that meant.

"How wonderful for you, Janet. Have you any traces to show me?"

Janet blushed. "Not at present, miss. I am not whipped the way you were."

"Insolent child. Is your mistress in?"

"No, miss, but Miss Rachel is in the drawing room. Shall I announce you?"

"No, Janet. Let me take her by surprise. Go in on some pretext and leave the door open. I will follow you."

They walked together to the drawing-room, Lavinia pausing on the way to admire the beautifully-decorated Christmas tree, lighted by the gentle glow of up-to-date glass fairy-lights. Janet went into the room. Rachel looked up at her. "Janet, how many times have I told you not to leave the door open. Close it and report yourself."

"Very good, miss."

Rachel turned back to her book and Lavinia crept in as Janet left. She tiptoed behind the sofa and placed her white-gloved hands over Rachel's eyes.

"Guess who."

"Lavinia, you brute beast—why didn't you come to us at the beginning of the holidays?"

"I stayed a week with Amanda."

"Well, ring the bell, Delacourt, I will order us some tea."

"Very good, miss." Lavinia rung the bell.

"Tell me all about everything. You never write."

"I have too many lines to write. My hand won't stand any more."

"You should behave yourself."

"I do."

The door opened and a maid came in. An older maid, tall and reserved, but with a pleasing manner. For one moment Lavinia did not recognise her.

"Could you bring tea for Lavinia and me, please Constance?" said Rachel.

"Very good miss—and don't sit there without your slippers on."

"Oh, sorry Constance." Rachel slipped her slippers on quickly.

"Constance is allowed to spank me now," whispered Rachel.

"She looks so different—sort of rounded."

"Yes. Lady Chelverton says it is security and freedom from anxiety—and something else she won't say."

"Discipline, I bet."

They both giggled.

"But I told you to tell me everything, Delacourt. You are being most disobedient. Do you want a taste of the martinet?"

"No, miss. What shall I tell you?"

"Well, tell me about Ella. How does she like being your fag?"

"I think she rather likes it—or she *did*. When she came back to school after nearly three weeks at Mme. Gauvain's she was completely different—like a lamb. Instead of being cynical and unappreciative she was pleased with everything, grateful for every kindness. She got to know some of the nicer girls and was truly a pleasure to know. I didn't have much use for a fag with my little cubicle, but I always found some fetching and carrying for her to do—and she was so willing. And her weekly hundred lines were very neat. She was so much happier—she said she did not realise how unhappy she had been before until she started being happy.

"Well, as term wore on she went downhill. Bit by bit, she started getting sullen and self-absorbed again. Her lines got worse and she was so sulky when I rejected them. And, of course, you could see she was terribly unhappy again, though by this time there was no telling her anything. In the last week she got a bit better behaved, but not happier. I think the thought of going back to Mme. Gauvain's again was looming. But it just shows how wonderfully right the Magistra and Lady Chelverton were. Another dose of slaveying will probably improve her again, but it will take several coats to varnish her—Lady Chelverton said that. There is one thing I know that Ella doesn't, though."

"What is that?"

"Her fate is in my hands much more than she realises. If I give her a good report she could be let off her Punitive Service early—but if it goes on to the end of the year and I give her a bad report it might be extended for another year—and, if I *strongly recommend* that she do Punitive Service for another year, she will have to do it. What do you think of that?"

"I think Lady Chelverton is training you for something."

Janet brought in the tea. "I have some traces now, miss," she said to Lavinia. "I had to report myself for leaving the door open again."

"Didn't you explain that I ordered you to do it?" asked Lavinia.

"Oh, *no*, miss. I never answer back in any way. Would you like to see my traces, miss?"

The two young ladies lifted the maid's uniform skirt and admired the red impressions of the slip above her stocking-tops. Lavinia could not resist giving her a little Leblanc-like pinch, just where she was reddest.

"Ow! Thank you, miss. Will that be all, miss?"

"Yes, Janet. You are dismissed."

"Very good, miss."

Rachel leaned back on the sofa. "Lady Chelverton says I might be ready to go to school with you by the middle of next term. Wouldn't that be lovely?"

"Oh, *yes*, Rachel."

"But I am very nervous and impressionable. She is not sure whether I am right for school, so perhaps I shall just be a home-bunny." She looked very much like a home-bunny to Lavinia, somehow.

"Well, I can bring school to you. A girl from school is coming to stay with us tomorrow. A girl called Susan. She is just adorable. I know you will love her."

"How wonderful. We can be together every minute."

"Not *every* minute for me. I have two thousand lines to do for Amanda."

"Two *thousand*—oh, Lavinia, what did you do?"

"Nothing. It is a holiday task. Handwriting practice. I'll get up early every morning and try to do a lot of it then. Janet can call me as soon as she is awake. It is a very good scheme. I did it at Amanda's—oh, and you'll never guess what. I told the maid who did my room to send some one to wake me very early—you see I couldn't get started on the two thousand lines because Amanda kept giving me passages to copy—I said to send whoever gets up earliest, and she said "that will be the slavey".

"So the next morning, at the most ungodly hour, there came a knock at my door.

“‘Come in,’ I said, and in came the shyest little slavey you ever saw, all scrubbed and neatly uniformed and trotting about to the tune of the dawn chorus.

“She hardly ever speaks to any one above the level of a kitchen-maid, and having to address a young lady almost overwhelmed her. She stood there wringing her hands, saying: ‘If you please, miss, I was to call you, miss. Will you take tea, miss?’

“She was such a dear thing, so sweet and shy, and so quietly happy in her humble calling that my heart went out to her. But you know, all the time I had the feeling I had seen her somewhere before, but I just *couldn’t* place her—she looked so utterly different. It was only when she came back with the tea that I suddenly realised who she was.”

“Well, who was she?”

“She was Leaver.”

“Leaver—you mean basically-Leaver?”

“The very same.”

“Lavinia, I think that is a lovely story.”

“So do I—Is that a car?”

“Yes, it’s the Bentley. Lady Chelverton is back. She will be so glad to see you.”

“And I shall be so glad to see her.”

“And it’s nearly Christmas.”

“God’s in Her heaven ; all’s right with the world.”

THE END



Afterword

Is the Empire Real?

OF COURSE IT IS.

The fundamental premise of *The Feminine Régime* is that the Pit is no longer inhabitable and the only life worth living is that of the Empire. It should be clear even to the least imaginative reader that the authoress is entirely sincere in this. If the Empire were not a living reality the book would be not merely a fiction but a nonsense.

The Empire in which the events of *The Feminine Régime* take place is in fact a fictionalised version of the Empire in which the authoress lives.

In other words, the Empire is a real place—or rather a real state of being. One to which any girl could, like Lavinia or Janet, find her way.

But how far is the Empire of the book like the Empire in real life? Miss Snow never gives her Empire a name, nor does she use the names of the Provinces of the real Empire. She has been careful not to imply that her Empire is the real Empire—just something rather like it.

P—— House School is clearly based on St. Bride's School in Ireland, although she has moved it to England, and changed many of its features. The cinemas, clubs, parties and maidservants mentioned in the text will be familiar to all real-life Imperials. The power of a cinema usherette to discipline 'junior' Imperials attending a showing is entirely true to life, and if the punishment of the girl who disobeyed an usherette seems severe, it must be understood that it was an unusual and, in Imperial terms, rather shocking case. Obedience is the rule of life in the Empire.

The Imperial legal system is essentially the same in the book as in real life. The real Empire does live by its own laws, and the punishments given by the Magistra are certainly within the power of a true Imperial Court. Miss Snow, however—as is necessary in a novel—has dramatised things rather. No case of the gravity of that which takes place in the book has ever taken place in the real Empire. Most legal matters are simple questions of disobedience or bad behaviour dealt with summarily by the District Governess (yes, of course we really have District Governesses). It is all perhaps a shade more intimate, and Imperial authority possibly even more schoolmistressy than the book implies. The District Governess is in close touch with the households of her District. In many cases she will give lines or a strapping for such things as an untidy drawing-room.

It will be seen from the above that a case such as that of Rachel

Valentine could not occur in the real Empire. The idea of a household being within the Empire yet so separate from it that no one knew for sure what was happening in it is quite alien to the close-knit, maternalist nature of the Empire as it actually is. Lady Chelverton makes it clear in Chapter 13 that the book is set at a time when the Empire has expanded beyond its present size, and the problems of larger-scale administration are beginning to be felt, including the assimilation of people whose attitudes are "not truly Imperial". Lady Chelverton's aim is to bring the enlarged Empire back to the warm, intimate authority of the original—that is, the Empire as it is now.

Lavinia's thoughts on Imperial authority in Chapter 12 represent the reality exactly: "Most Imperials were obedient and took a magical, impersonal-sensual pleasure in their obedience; a thing unknown outside a feminine matriarchal order." The thrilling warmth of submission to a strict but kind, all-enclosing feminine Order is something which binds together every Imperial, be she mistress or maid, adult or 'child'.

The treatment of maidservants in the French household is severer than anything in the real Empire—not because such discipline might never take place, but because it is never given in such an atmosphere of emotional coldness, though even here we find a subtle feminine warmth nestling, at first unsuspected, beneath the surface.

The most salient respect in which the Empire of the book differs from that in real life occurs because truth, in this case, is stranger than fiction. Every character in the book has only one name and one personality. Fiction does tend to simplify life. In the real Empire, many girls have more than one name and *persona*. It is not uncommon, for example, for one Imperial to be both a sophisticated lady and a rather small girl. Which is her 'real' identity is a question that does not have any answer, nor does it need one. This does not mean, of course, that there are not 'complete' maidservants who are nothing but maids—civilised life could hardly continue without them. It does mean, though, that life in the Empire is more mysterious and fascinating than even this book has shown. Only the ambiguity between Lavinia and Delacourt—particularly in Chapter 14—hints at some of the complexities of what is sometimes called 'life theatre'—a delightful mode of living in which 'play' and 'real life' become organically interfused. Some of this magic of multiple *personæ* will be explored in depth in Miss Snow's next novel, tentatively entitled *Children of the Void*.

In the meantime, any girl or lady who would like to make contact with the Empire is invited to write in the first instance to:

Her Excellency, the Imperial Ambassador,

C/O The Wildfire Club, B.M.Elegance, London, W.C.1. (full address)

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